RECLAIMING SPACE, REIMAGINING HOUSING

Exploring the transformative potential of alternative housing imaginaries in Amsterdam

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Master thesis, 2 July 2025

IMAGINATION ALLOWS US TO MOVE FROM WHAT IS TO WHAT COULD BE

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Amsterdam, Amsterdam
Waar moet ik wonen dan?
Amsterdam, Amsterdam
Waar ik zo naar terugverlang
Amsterdam, Amsterdam

Het gaat nooit lukken ben ik bang
Er is geen plek die mij zo gelukkig maken kan
Moet ik dan nu naar Lelystad, Almere of Parijs?
Ik blijf optimistisch, maar sta onderaan de lijst
Deze zoektocht duurt zo lang, mijn haren worden grijs
Iedereen verdient een thuis in het Mokums paradijs

Songtekst afkomstig uit Geluk van Sophie Straat (2020).

Amsterdam, Amsterdam
Where am I supposed to live then?
Amsterdam, Amsterdam
The place I long to return to
Amsterdam, Amsterdam

I'm afraid it's never going to work out
There's no place that can make me this happy
Do I now have to go to Lelystad, Almere, or Paris?
I stay optimistic, but I'm at the bottom of the list
This search is taking so long, my hair is turning grey
Everyone deserves a home in the Mokum paradise

Lyrics from Geluk by Sophie Straat (2020). Translation by the author.

Preface

This thesis forms the end of my journey as a MADE student and brings together the lessons and values that have shaped me over the past years. The research is rooted in a fascination with just urban transitions, and more specifically, with how people challenge and reimagine systems in times of crisis or uncertainty. In a city like Amsterdam, where the housing and affordability crisis feels both personally and socially very urgent, I wanted to explore not only the dominant housing regime but also the powerful alternatives that emerge from the margins. With a social sciences background in Human Geography & Urban Planning, I have long been drawn to the social dimension of urban change, including practices of spatial resistance. My interest in squatting was sparked by its dual nature: both as a political movement and as a lived experiment in alternative urban futures. This thesis is, therefore, not only an academic exercise but also a reflection of my belief that research should offer tools to facilitate just metropolitan transitions.

This research is primarily intended for those interested in housing justice and urban governance. I hope it provides not only critical insights but also inspiration and hope. Of course, writing this thesis was not always a smooth process. There were many moments of doubt but also of motivation and interesting conversations. I want to thank my supervisors, Marja Elsinga and Juliana Gonçalves from TU Delft, for their feedback and encouragement throughout the process. Thanks to the AMS Institute for hosting my defense. Moreover, I am beyond grateful for the inspiring people I interviewed, who shared their time and stories, even inviting me into their homes. My MADE peers have been a fantastic source of support and laughter. I feel lucky to have experienced this time together. Finally, a big thanks to my friends, family, and boyfriend for their unconditional support, even when they got tired of me talking about my thesis again. I owe you one!

Thank you for reading this work. I hope it gives you something to think about, and perhaps to even act upon. Ultimately, it is imagination that allows us to move from what is to what could be.

Best regards,

Yasmine Schilder
Amsterdam, 2 July 2025

Abstract

"Prefigurative planning is not about how to 'build that city on the hill', but how not to give up on the pursuit of 'better' cities by combining criticality with imagination"

Davoudi, 2023, p. 2277

Responding to Amsterdam's ongoing housing challenges, this thesis uses the concept of alternative imaginaries to explore the need for new ways of thinking about housing. The research nuances dominant supply-driven solutions by studying how alternative housing imaginaries are presented, enacted, and negotiated from the bottom up. More specifically, this research uses the phenomenon of squatting as both a historical and contemporary form of housing resistance. Building on Amsterdam's rich squatting history, this study uncovers what alternatives these movements envision and how they live their ideals in occupied spaces. Therefore, imagination is treated in this research not just as a utopian dream, but rather as a prefigurative practice through which an alternative vision is put into practice. By studying these alternative visions and practices, the research exposes path dependencies and contradictions in dominant housing imaginaries.

By adopting a multi-method qualitative approach, this research examines the transformative potential of the alternative imaginaries of squatting movements in Amsterdam. The study covers both the historical impact of squatting movements and how more recent movements interacted with the system. In sum, these movements challenge the dominant narrative of housing as a commodity. In contrast, this research reveals how squatters see housing as inherently relational, envisioning them as urban commons of care and collective governance. By studying squatting as more than a protest or illegal occupation, the research adds empirical evidence for acknowledging social movements as imaginative and transformative forces, both within and outside the formal system. By connecting these questions to Amsterdam's policy context, the study contributes to debates on socio-political transformation. It offers practical and conceptual insights into how reimagining housing can open alternatives toward more inclusive and participatory forms of urban living.

Keywords: Housing Imaginaries; Squatting; Prefiguration; Transition Pathways; Urban Studies; Amsterdam.

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1 Introduction

In October 2021, activists occupied a vacant hotel on the Marnixstraat in the center of Amsterdam. Their action was not just about finding a roof above their heads. It was a form of resistance against the municipal governance. "Pak Mokum terug" (*Take Mokum [Amsterdam] back*), they declared from banners hanging on the building, protesting against the city's neoliberal policies and worsening housing crisis (Hotel Mokum, 2021; van Bockxmeer, 2024). Yet their dream did not last long. After six weeks of events, renovations, and some temporary residents, city authorities ordered the police to evict 'Hotel Mokum'. While Amsterdam was once known for its progressive urban and squatting movements, it had now become a city where urban action and resistance are criminalized (Broekman, 2023). However, even though Hotel Mokum is gone, the movement continues, along with the dream of 'a city that belongs to everyone' (van Bockxmeer, 2024). While squatting may not solve the housing crisis, it remains a radical act of reclaiming space and reimagining futures. Crucially, housing is not simply a site of shortage or protest. It represents many metropolitan challenges, where debates about equality, democratic governance, spatial justice, and sustainability intersect. As long as these challenges exist, so too must the fight for alternatives, making imaginaries not only relevant but essential to study.

In 2009, Uitermark (2009) wrote his '*In Memoriam for the Just City of Amsterdam*'. Earlier, Amsterdam was labeled a 'just city' by Susan Fainstein (2005), who argued that Amsterdam had found the right balance between equity, diversity, growth, and sustainability. While Uitermark (2009) agreed that Amsterdam outperforms American cities, he believed these factors do not necessarily make a city 'just'. According to him, "*a just city is a city where exploitation and alienation are absent*" (p. 350). His research identified three main issues that contributed to the decline of Amsterdam's just development: increased neoliberal policy, the absorption of activist movements into governance structures, and the erosion of social housing due to privatization and gentrification. For decades, the Dutch housing system was indeed seen as an example, with one of the largest and most independent social housing stocks in Europe (Boelhouwer, 2019; Elsinga et al., 2014). Beyond state policy, civil resistance played a decisive role in achieving this success (Uitermark, 2009). Squatting was a historically powerful tactic, successfully transforming empty buildings into homes and cultural centers. Additionally, urban protest pressured authorities to expand tenant protections and rent controls (Pruijt, 2003; Uitermark, 2009).

However, as neoliberal policies gained momentum in the Netherlands in the 1990s, this idea of the just city started to decline. Dutch housing associations (*woningcorporaties*), which had once been responsible for providing public goods, became increasingly financialized and began selling off stock to private investors (Boelhouwer, 2019). The 2008 financial crisis was used to justify further neoliberalization of the housing system (van Gent & Hochstenbach, 2020). One significant shift during that time was the introduction of allocation rules based on income for social housing, leaving 57% of the Dutch population excluded from access (Boelhouwer & Priemus, 2014). At the same time, homeownership rates and real estate speculation skyrocketed, making affordable (rental) housing increasingly unfeasible. It is widely argued that the financialization of housing is a key driver for inequalities (Boelhouwer, 2019), accelerating gentrification and exclusionary processes (van Gent, 2013). Simultaneously, squatting became criminalized in 2010, erasing it as a force of urban resistance. A city once proud of its radical movements now actively suppressed these values (Draaisma, 2016).

As of 2025, the Dutch housing crisis continues. Amsterdam faces a severe shortage of almost 75.000 homes (Het Parool, 2024). In line with this, rental prices in the city have skyrocketed (van der Kleij, 2024). While the municipality tries to implement all kinds of restrictive and managerial policies (Dominicus, 2024; Gemeente Amsterdam, 2022a), these measures often fail to change dominant housing systems from within. The question remains how more radical imaginaries, like those of squatting movements, can survive in this increasingly securitized landscape. Can they influence or transform the system, or are they actively pushed to the margins? These questions are especially relevant in light of a broader search and fight for alternative housing solutions (Rolnik, 2019). Alongside squatting, various other practices, such as cooperative housing (co-ops), eco-villages, and the tiny house movement, are emerging as bottom-up responses to the housing crisis (Wabel, 2024; Czischke et al., 2020; Wilson & Wadham, 2023). Former politician Adrie Duivesteijn was a key voice in institutionalizing these housing alternatives. He specifically advocated for citizens to act as producers rather than consumers of urban space and housing solutions (Zonneveld, 2023). Building on this vision, this research studies squatting as an active prefigurative force within the broader search for more inclusive (housing) futures.

1.1 Research gaps & relevance

To shed light on this matter, this study uses the concept of imaginaries as an analytical lens to explore how squatting in Amsterdam continues to function as an alternative housing imaginary and whether it holds any potential for change. Here, the housing crisis is seen as a broader symptom of what Ghosh (2016) calls a 'crisis of imagination', where neoliberal pragmatism dominates and actively constrains transformative alternatives. This research uses the concept of imaginaries to define collectively held visions of how the world should be. Building on the work of Castoriadis (1987), imaginaries are not simply discursive ideals but actively shape institutions. For housing, this means that the collective vision of what housing should be actively shapes legal and policy frameworks. This fits a broader trend in urban studies, where the concept of imaginaries gained popularity to analyze how dominant beliefs shape urban space and governance (Çinar & Bender, 2007). Imaginaries, therefore, influence what forms of housing are considered desirable or marginalized. Additionally, it influences which governance models are considered legitimate or inevitable and which are seen as unthinkable.

This research addresses a research gap that aims to understand how prefigurative practices can drive socio-political change. To assess whether squatting movements hold transformative potential, the research combines Geels' (2002) Multi-Level Perspective (MLP) with Törnberg's (2021) transition pathways. While the MLP has often been used to examine socio-technical transitions, its application to housing and activism remains limited. Additionally, the MLP is criticized for placing too much emphasis on smooth regime replacements, with limited attention to activist-based transitions (Geels, 2011). Törnberg's (2021) transition framework helps bridge this gap by integrating prefigurative politics into transition theory. His typology enables a nuanced analysis of multiple pathways through which grassroots alternatives can interact within dominant systems, leaving a blind spot for transformation beyond institutional pathways. Acknowledging these gaps, this study adapts these analytical lenses to study how squatting imaginaries interact with the dominant housing regime. The research addresses an additional gap in urban governance literature by not only analyzing the pathways of institutional change but also the tensions and frictions that arise when alternatives try to change dominant regimes.

Uitermark (2009) argues that it is the role of critical urbanists to open up debate and show that alternatives are possible. This thesis follows this by applying the concept of imaginaries to housing. This connection is still relatively understudied, unlike smart city, sustainability, or socio-technical imaginaries (Jasanoff & Kim, 2015; Davoudi & Machen, 2022; Machen et al., 2023; Vanolo, 2016). Most studies view squatting as an act of resistance, study specific legal disputes, or focus on key historical successes. Pruijt (2003; 2013) holds a legacy of studying different forms of squatting and their level of institutionalization. However, less attention is paid to squatting as a transformative force that actively prefigures alternative housing imaginaries. This research, therefore, aligns with Schiller-Merkens' (2022) standpoint, arguing that research is needed to understand how everyday prefiguration can lead to broader transformation. This study adds insights into how radical imaginaries could realize alternative futures by connecting imaginaries to transition studies. In short, the research uses new combinations of theory. Additionally, it presents empirical insights to fill a gap in understanding imaginaries and how they are situated between grassroots activism and institutional structures.

Beyond theoretical gaps, the research contributes to understanding housing as a core metropolitan challenge. Indeed, the housing crisis in Amsterdam is not an isolated problem (Rolnik, 2019). It is what Florida & Schneider (2018) refer to as a "fundamental paradox of contemporary capitalism", referring to the contrast where cities are increasingly economically powerful yet fail to provide adequate and affordable housing. While this is true for the Global North, the article stresses the fact that the issue is even bigger in the rapidly urbanizing cities in the Global South. Where Florida & Schneider (2018) point to the worldwide financialization of housing as a core cause of the issue, van der Maas (2023) specifies the causes for the Netherlands as a combination of favorable mortgage policies and open real estate markets, as well as limited new construction and household fragmentation. Van Bockxmeer (2022) adds that housing that fits the population is as important as having enough stock. These articles show that the global housing problem is not just about quantitative shortage but reflects a mismatch between people's lives and the types of housing. Addressing the problem, therefore, requires a socio-cultural shift in rethinking what housing should be (van der Maas, 2023). This also allows housing solutions to interact with other metropolitan challenges, such as participatory governance or climate change.

1.2 Research questions, methods & objectives

This research focuses on squatting movements in Amsterdam to explore how alternative imaginaries might spark a fundamental rethinking of what housing is and what it could be. Squatting directly responds to the housing crisis. Additionally, beyond housing, it is also a way to reclaim the right to shape the city in a broader sense. Despite responding to context-dependent factors, squatting is a global response to urban challenges. This research specifically explores the imaginaries of squatting movements in Amsterdam. Additionally, it analyzes how these ideas are enacted in practice and whether they actually transform the dominant housing structure from below. Rather than seeing squatting simply as a protest or legal issue, this study investigates its role as a prefigurative practice. Occupied buildings, in this sense, are places where alternative futures are actively shaped and negotiated. The research objectives are twofold: Understanding (1) how alternative imaginaries are presented and enacted by squatting movements, and (2) how they interact with dominant institutional frameworks to assess their transformative potential.

The main research question guiding this study is:

How have squatting movements in Amsterdam envisioned and enacted alternative housing imaginaries in the past and present, and what is their transformative potential?

The thesis is organized around four subquestions to allow for a comprehensive answer to the main question. Each subquestion addresses a specific research dimension and is answered using a distinct method. Together, these subquestions illustrate how squatting operates not only as a form of resistance but as a prefigurative and transformative force within Amsterdam's housing landscape.

SQ1 | Situating the imaginary
How have squatting movements in Amsterdam historically shaped housing imaginaries and influenced urban governance?

SQ2 | Presenting the imaginary
What alternative housing imaginaries are presented and prefigured by the recent squatting collective Mokum Kraakt, and how do they challenge dominant housing narratives?

SQ3 | Living the imaginary
How are alternative housing imaginaries lived, governed, and negotiated in practice, and what tensions arise between institutionalization and autonomy?

SQ4 | (Un)locking the imaginary
Does Amsterdam's policy landscape provide a window of opportunity for alternative housing imaginaries to transform dominant regime logics?

To answer these questions, the research uses a multi-method qualitative approach that combines historical analysis, thematic content analysis, semi-structured interviews, and policy analysis. To put the phenomenon in its broad context, the study looks at both historical squatting practices and the more recent collective Mokum Kraakt. It explores how alternative ideas are presented, enacted, and negotiated in Amsterdam's urban context. The sources of data include archival materials, movement publications, social media posts, policy documents, and interviews with key actors. Together, these methods provide an interdisciplinary understanding of the dynamics involved.

The thesis is organized as follows: Chapter 2 outlines the theoretical framework and introduces the core theoretical concepts before connecting them in the conceptual framework. Chapter 3 explains the methodology and research design used to answer the subquestions. After this, Chapter 4 presents the empirical results, divided into four sub-chapters that each answer a specific subquestion. To tie everything together, Chapter 5 synthesizes the findings and offers a discussion about the theoretical and practical contributions of this study. Finally, Chapter 6 concludes the thesis by answering the main research question, reflecting on the contributions of this study, and suggesting areas for future research.

2 Theoretical framework

"To imagine is to think about possibilities other than possible, times other than now, and places other than here."

Davoudi & Machen, 2022, p. 205

2.1 Imaginaries

The concept of imaginaries provides an interesting starting point to understand how people perceive the boundaries of what is possible. Simply put, imaginaries influence how societies understand and experience reality. In the case of housing, this means that imaginaries determine what is seen as 'desired' or 'legitimate' forms of living. Following Davoudi & Machen (2022), imagination is a "generative force that allows us to conceive the world differently and act upon it" (p. 205). This quote shows that imagination is not just an abstract vision but an active force that influences how we shape the world and its institutions, including housing. To explain this, philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis (1987) introduced the concept of 'imaginary institution of society'. This concept describes how societies are formed through collective meanings. With this concept, he rejected the idea that society is solely shaped by economic or material processes. This implies that the world as we organize it is not given or inevitable. Instead, social imaginaries directly and indirectly influence laws, norms, and ideologies. To explain this further, Castoriadis (1987) made a distinction between 'instituting society' and 'instituted society.' One the one hand, instituting society refers to the alternative forces that generate new social meanings and challenge dominant worldviews. The instituted society, on the other hand, refers to the dominant norms that stabilize set worldviews (Castoriadis, 1987). To illustrate this, the instituted society can be seen as the dominant order that shapes what is 'normal'. The instituting society, on the other hand, refers to the alternative understandings that aim to challenge this understanding of what is possible.

In the book *Modern Social Imaginaries*, Charles Taylor (2004) expands on Castoriadis' (1987) theory by introducing the concept of social imaginaries. He defines these as "the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows" (p. 23). To put it simpler, social imaginaries shape people's understanding of the norms and roles that society expects from its citizens. These norms and values guide how people collectively understand society and what it is to be a homeowner, for example. Social imaginaries ensure that civil actions are rooted in a common background that makes a specific worldview appear 'the right way to do it'. However, as Castoriadis' (1987) idea of instituting society already suggested, these imaginaries are not given. Instead, they are always subject to conflict and tensions. Taylor (2004) notes that as alternative practices emerge, they can challenge and potentially even change the existing social imaginary. However, such alternatives often face pushback from the rigid dominant institutions (the instituted society) that aim to maintain existing power structures (Castoriadis, 1987). This struggle shows that changing imaginaries and worldviews inherently involve complex power dynamics, making it difficult to achieve change.

Beyond their social role, imaginaries have a spatial aspect. Henri Lefebvre's (1974) famous work on the *Production of Space* offers a framework to understand how imaginaries produce, and are produced by, the built environment. Essentially, Lefebvre (1974) argues that space is not a neutral container but a socially produced construct. Because of this, space is continuously negotiated through a configuration of power relations. Additionally, it is shaped by both historical processes and everyday practices. To conceptualize this constructivist view of space, Lefebvre (1974) identified three interrelated dimensions of space (see Figure 1):

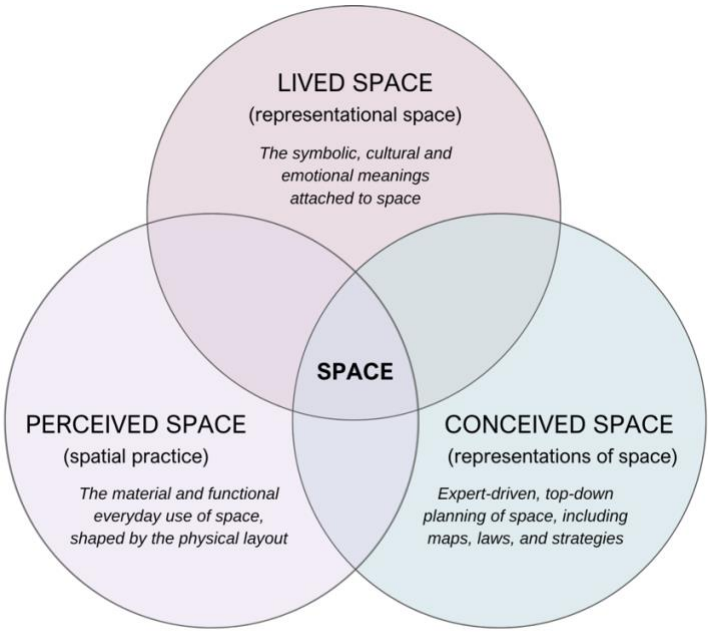


Figure 1: Lefebvre's (1974) conceptualization of space

- **Perceived space**, or spatial practice, refers to how we physically and functionally use space in everyday life. The way we use space is influenced by infrastructure and design, including, for example, housing arrangements and land use patterns.
- **Conceived space**, or representations of space, represent the expert-driven, top-down planning of space and include, for example, zoning laws and development strategies. They show how space should be used according to dominant (planning) ideologies.
- **Lived space**, or representational space, refers to the discursive meanings attached to urban space. This includes, for example, emotions or cultural values tied to a specific place. These everyday experiences that are inherent to lived space are important forces in shaping alternative imaginaries that challenge dominant social and spatial ideas.

Lefebvre's (1974) triad offers a lens to understand how squatting movements interact with space. To explain this briefly, squatting movements reclaim perceived space through occupation. Furthermore, they challenge the conceived space by resisting dominant spatial norms. Finally, they create lived space through reimagining housing in everyday life. The tensions between these aspects form the arena where urban imaginaries develop. As scholars like Çinar & Bender (2007), Mah (2012), and Schnell (2022) argue, we can view cities as collective imaginaries. These imaginaries, or ways in which we perceive and shape the city, are influenced by history and daily practices, but also by, for example, media representations. Mah (2012) points to the difference between official urban imaginaries produced by state and market actors, often developed for marketing purposes, and community-based imaginaries that arise from actual lived experiences. Schnell (2022) points out that the friction that these different views create can serve as tools of social critique and "hold inherent transformative potential" (p. 13). Jasanoff & Kim (2015) add the condition that transformation potential depends on the extent to which alternative imaginaries can materialize within infrastructures, whether legal, infrastructural, or technical. Their concept of socio-technical imaginaries shows that abstract visions must be embedded in material infrastructures to drive systemic change. Academic literature on imaginaries, therefore, suggests that the concept includes both material and immaterial dimensions.

2.1.1 Immaterial dimension

The immaterial dimension of imaginaries includes the symbolic and cultural factors that shape how societies make sense of the world. These forces manifest themselves mainly through language and storytelling, which help societies understand the future. Other interesting immaterial aspects include symbology and collective histories. Research by Vanolo (2016) points out that discourse is never neutral. It is inherently embedded in power structures that shape which futures are considered possible or necessary. In his analysis of smart city imaginaries, he shows how the dominant discourses treat 'smart' citizens as passive actors. This article highlights the importance of language. Similarly, Lefebvre (1974) highlights how discourse shapes space. He argues that space is not just the place where social relations happen but also a medium through which power is performed and contested. Davoudi & Machen (2022) and Machen et al. (2023) also emphasize the role of mediums for producing and circulating imaginaries. In climate change discourse, for example, the medium through which arguments are presented matters in the way in which people perceive them. Mediums can be defined as an "ensemble of material, infrastructural, discursive, and practice-based influences" (Davoudi & Machen, 2022, p. 206). Therefore, it covers both the immaterial and material aspects of the imaginary.

As illustrated, mediums can have multiple forms, ranging from fictional stories or visual images to more computerized models and calculations (Davoudi & Machen, 2022). This emphasizes how each medium circulates its own narratives and, therefore, can shape distinct worldviews. Feola et al. (2023) highlight the role of collective memory as an important force in shaping imaginaries. They argue that historical narratives are essential for legitimizing or contesting future visions, defining imaginaries as spatio-temporal constructs. Also, Levitas (2013) discusses this role of memory in utopian thinking. He argues that the past can be strategically used to justify future visions. Machen et al. (2023) and Davoudi & Machen (2022) expand on this immaterial dimension by analyzing how media, visual culture, arts, and symbolic representations influence which imaginaries gain traction and influence. This body of research shows that imaginaries are not simply mental constructs. They are actively performed, for example, through rituals or media narratives. Understanding this immaterial dimension is key to understanding how dominant ideas persist and why alternative visions struggle to become reality.

2.1.2 Material dimension

The power of imaginaries lies in their ability to challenge the dominant regime in material and immaterial ways. The material dimension refers to the physical infrastructures that can either facilitate or constrain certain imaginaries (Appadurai, 2015). In practice, these infrastructures can range from technologies to spatial arrangements or legal frameworks. As Jasanoff & Kim (2015) stress, imaginaries do not exist in isolation. Their transformative potential depends on how they fit within dominant legal, economic, and infrastructural systems. Without infrastructural support, alternatives risk remaining marginal or utopian. In short, an alternative future vision needs the infrastructure to make this reality. If this legal or spatial infrastructure is lacking, the dominant regime will inevitably push this alternative to the margins. Vanolo (2016) illustrates this by connecting imaginaries to urban development. Here, dominant norms are safeguarded through, for example, funding and legal mechanisms. These barriers make it difficult for alternative urban visions to come to life. Similarly, Mah (2012) explains how urban policies both shape and are shaped by dominant ideas about space. Therefore, material structures are described as gatekeepers, deciding which imaginaries turn from ideas into reality. Appadurai (2015) and Feola et al. (2023) use the concept of assemblages to better understand how different elements interact in constructing viable imaginaries. This concept explains how various material and immaterial elements connect and interact to either stabilize or disrupt dominant paradigms.

This assemblage approach aligns with Actor-Network Theory. When applying ANT, imaginaries cannot be seen as isolated ideas but as networks of actions and infrastructures that co-produce reality (Appadurai, 2015). This research builds on Davoudi & Machen (2022), who advocate for bringing back materiality into thinking about imaginaries. They emphasize that imaginaries shape policy and governance. This means that imaginaries translate into the physical infrastructure that is being implemented, as well as the economic and political frameworks that guide these decisions. Again, Machen et al. (2023) stress that the mediums through which imaginaries are constructed and communicated play a big role in these decisions, directly affecting the legitimacy and degree of influence of imaginaries. In sum, literature shows that the material and immaterial dimensions of imaginaries are mutually important. While discourse and symbols shape how society is experienced, infrastructures and institutions determine what becomes materially possible. For this research, both assemblages and mediums offer essential entry points to analyze how squatting movements try to embed alternative housing imaginaries, both in narrative and in practice.

2.1.3 Conclusion: Alternative imaginaries

Jasanoff & Kim (2015) define socio-technical imaginaries as “collectively held and performed visions of desirable futures” (p. 4). Thinking about alternative desirable futures is crucial for analyzing and reimagining society (Levitas, 2013). Pinder (2002) and Koning & van Dijk (2021), therefore, advocate for a renewed recognition of the power of utopian urbanism. They highlight the ability of this approach to challenge certain urban norms that are generally taken for granted. Pinder (2002) sees utopian urbanism as “the expression of desire for a better way of being and living through the imagining of a different city and a different urban life” (p. 230). This research is based on the idea that imaginaries are not just abstract visions but essential tools for creating more just and resilient alternative futures. As Vanolo (2016) states, utopian ideals should be a key component of spatial imaginaries. A key example of how imaginaries can serve both as tools for understanding societal transformation can be seen in studies around climate imaginaries and smart city imaginaries (Davoudi & Machen, 2022; Vanolo, 2016).

Studying imaginaries enables a growing understanding that dominant systems are not inevitable and can be reimagined. While climate and smart city imaginaries have received considerable attention, the idea of imaginaries can also be applied to other areas that involve dominant norms, such as housing. Ghosh (2016) argues that in relation to climate change, modernity is faced with a ‘crisis of imagination’. Today’s planning often emphasizes practical, technocratic solutions (Levitas, 2013). This means that transformative change is limited by a culture that views alternative futures as unrealistic or impractical (Pinder, 2002). This research is set within the larger discussion on the transformative power of imaginaries. Just as climate imaginaries have started to inspire new ways of thinking about sustainability, housing imaginaries can offer a critical lens for rethinking ‘a city that belongs to everyone’. The following section will elaborate more on the dominant regime, using literature to illustrate how dominant imaginaries shape and limit what is currently possible and liveable in the domain of housing.

2.2 Dominant Housing Imaginaries

Connecting housing to what was previously said about imaginaries, housing needs to be seen as more than a physical structure. Instead, it is a social-political construct that is shaped by dominant ways of thinking that define what forms of living are considered desirable or possible. As previously explained, imaginaries manifest through material systems. Here, these systems include housing policies, financial instruments, and spatial design frameworks. Additionally, immaterial structures, including discourse around homeownership and family norms, shape how we understand housing. Wabel (2024) confirms this, arguing that housing both symbolically and materially reflects societal values and goals. As Wabel (2024) states, "the buildings a society constructs are emblematic of the way a society wants to see itself" (p. 4). These dominant views are not neutral. They show power dynamics that favor specific housing models. This includes, for example, private ownership and market-driven development. At the same time, these dominant structures constrain alternatives that seek to organize housing differently. Combining the ideas of social imaginaries (Taylor, 2004), spatial imaginaries (Lefebvre, 1974; Çinar & Bender, 2007), and socio-technical imaginaries (Jasanoff & Kim, 2015), housing imaginaries can be defined as shared beliefs about what housing is and should be for people to engage in critical aspects of life (Wabel, 2024). Notably, dominant housing views maintain the existing situation by making certain lifestyles seem inevitable. They portray alternatives, such as collective or non-commodified models, as unrealistic or unappealing.

To critically examine how the dominant housing system treats alternatives, this research uses a framework designed by Vanags et al. (2017), who differentiate between technical, financial, social, governance, and environmental aspects of housing. For the sake of this research, the technical and environmental aspects are merged into what is called a 'physical' aspect. A spatial aspect is added to place housing into its broader (urban) context. Human geographers, such as van Gent (2013), stress this spatial aspect due to the broader socio-spatial effects of housing. In this view, housing is not individual homes but interconnected spatial entities. To understand the complex dimensions of the dominant housing system, this research thus identifies five interrelated aspects: financial, political, social, spatial, and physical (see Table 1). Beyond the framework of Vanags et al. (2017), these aspects are based on literature that highlights the connections between housing and the economic system (Rolnik, 2019; Madden & Marcuse, 2016), governance beliefs (Jacobs, 2019; Uitermark, 2009), social and cultural norms (Ronald, 2008), spatial structures (Lefebvre, 1974; van Gent, 2013), and physical form (Aranda, 2024). Together, these aspects provide a way to understand how main housing ideas operate as a dominant system, both through material and immaterial dimensions.

Table 1: Dimensions of housing including dominant imaginaries

Dimension	Definition	Dominant imaginary	Main sources
Financial	The economic structures, investment mechanisms, and state/market forces that shape housing and ownership models.	Housing as a commodity and investment asset, where market forces, financialization, and homeownership are prioritized through speculative market.	Rolnik (2019); Fernandez & Aalbers (2016); Boelhouwer (2020); van Gent & Hochstenbach (2020)
Political	The governance decisions, policy, and political ideologies that dictate housing regulation and the role of the state/market.	Housing as an individual responsibility, characterized by neoliberalism, deregulation, privatization, and reduced state intervention, favoring ownership.	Jacobs (2019) Flynn & Montalbano (2024); Forrest & Hirayama (2009); Howells & Olsen (2025).
Social	The cultural values, social norms, and lived experiences that shape housing perceptions and realities.	Housing as centered around home-ownership and the nuclear family as economic agents and markers of success and stability.	Blunt & Dowling (2006); Ronald & Arundel (2023); Aranda (2024).
Spatial	The ways in which housing is physically distributed and structured with the broader urban (or regional) landscape.	Shift from state-driven spatial planning toward market-driven redevelopment, risking gentrification, displacement, and privatization of public space.	Lefebvre (1991); Musterd & Ostendorf (1998); van Gent (2013); Smith (1996); Harvey (2001).
Physical	The tangible aspects of housing, including design, materials, and typologies, shaped by economic, environmental, and social needs.	Standardized, high-density housing, prioritizing efficiency and increasingly sustainability, with limited adaptability and diversity.	Aranda (2024); Ronald & Elsinga (2011); Hagbert et al. (2013); Wabel (2024).

2.2.1 Financial dimension

In recent decades, housing has increasingly turned into a financial asset. Therefore, the financial dimension of housing refers to the investment methods and logics of capital accumulation that shape housing accessibility and ownership models (Rolnik, 2013; Fernandez & Aalbers, 2016). Many people understand housing through this financial lens. It is often seen as a commodity or speculative asset and integrated into global capital flows (Fernandez & Aalbers, 2016). This perspective contrasts with the belief that housing should be a fundamental social right based on use-value (Rolnik, 2019; Madden & Marcuse, 2016). The increased financialization of housing is tied to a shift towards neoliberal governance. This shift has been characterized by reduced state intervention and the integration of housing into global markets. Because of this, houses have become active financial instruments (Fernandez & Aalbers, 2016). The result is increased real estate speculation and redevelopment processes that prioritize capital gains over use value, often leading to pricing out residents and gentrifying neighborhoods for profit (Smith, 1996). This financial dimension also materializes in cultural norms. Ronald (2008) describes how homeownership has been promoted as the ideal tenure model that is fiscally incentivized and positioned as a vehicle for asset-based welfare (Doling & Elsinga, 2013).

National contexts reflect varying trajectories of financialized capitalism (Fernandez & Aalbers, 2016). Howells & Olesen (2025) explain this through what they call ‘welfare state path dependencies’. For the Dutch case, Boelhouwer (2019) emphasizes their traditionally strong social renting sector. However, also here, the regime increasingly started prioritizing homeownership while reducing rental protection and other state interventions. Van Gent & Hochstenbach (2020) add that these policies have accelerated after the 2008 financial crisis. This led to favoring more investment-led development. Multiple scholars argue that this inherent growth narrative masks deepening inequalities, with access to homeownership increasingly celebrated and rental protections eroded (Boelhouwer, 2019; Rolnik, 2019). Recent signals reflect growing institutional awareness of affordability and inequality challenges. Examples include the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s (OECD) Brick by Brick report (2021), the appointment of an EU commissioner for housing (Grander & Elsinga, 2025), and growing International Monetary Fund (IMF) concerns (Igan, 2024). While some frame this as a shift toward ‘post-neoliberalism’ (Flynn & Montalbano, 2024), financialization remains the dominant regime logic. Still, these developments may open a window of opportunity for more equitable alternatives to gain traction.

2.2.2 Political dimension

As already revealed, housing is inherently political. More specifically, this refers to the political decisions that determine the accessibility and availability of different types of housing. This is inherently influenced by changing governments or shifting ideologies. According to Madden & Marcuse (2016), the political dimension determines how housing is regulated and how the relationship between the state and the market is positioned. In many contexts, including the Netherlands, this dimension has been shaped by a neoliberal ideology that promotes market-driven development. Following reduced state intervention, this also comes with the privatization of public assets (Forrest & Hirayama, 2009; Jacobs, 2019; Uitermark, 2009). Over time, this has normalized the idea that housing markets are the most efficient allocators of housing. Additionally, it points to individuals as primarily responsible for securing shelter (Flynn & Montalbano, 2024). Neoliberal governance, therefore, does more than enabling financialization. It legitimizes a withdrawal of the state from housing provision and reinforces ownership as a norm. As such, neoliberal housing governance consolidates power through its institutions.

The Dutch case presents a mixed path. Housing policies have increasingly supported a more financialized and neoliberal model, while maintaining a strong social rental sector (Boelhouwer, 2019; Elsinga, 2025). Elsinga (2025) explains that the Dutch housing sector was initially based on social liberalism, as shown by the Woningwet of 1901. This law ensured that housing associations received state support but remained independent. However, policies like 'nota-Heerma' in 1989 and the financial independence of housing associations in 1995 mark a shift towards neoliberalism (Elsinga, 2025). Additional EU rules introduced stricter income limits, which reinforced targeted access to social housing instead of universal access (Elsinga & Lind, 2013). Despite these dominant models, growing debates within institutions and politics suggest a potential post-neoliberal shift in the Netherlands (Flynn & Montalbano, 2024). In summary, the political aspect shapes the rules of the game. This influences which housing models are seen as legitimate from a political and governance perspective.

2.2.3 Social dimension

The social dimension of housing includes the everyday lived experiences. It is about the cultural values and social norms that shape how housing is perceived within society. Blunt & Dowling (2006) argue that housing is inherently a social space. Housing is a central component in social reproduction and identity formation. Additionally, it reflects broader societal attitudes toward class and family structures (Ronald, 2008). Generally speaking, social housing imaginaries are closely tied to the ideal of homeownership, which is portrayed as a pathway to financial security and successful societal participation (Ronald, 2008). This resonates with neoliberal values of individual responsibility, emphasizing housing as a private responsibility rather than a form of collective welfare (Jacobs, 2019; Forrest & Hirayama, 2009). However, whether these ideas of homeownership as an accessible and secure housing form are still rooted in reality has been questioned by scholars like Fiske & Aalbers (2020) and Forrest & Hirayama (2009), who accuse this model of being inherently unequal and unstable.

Moreover, the dominant social imaginary of housing is deeply tied to the nuclear family model. This refers to a family unit consisting of a married couple and their children. Housing design and policy have been extensively influenced by this normative assumption of who should live in a house (Aranda, 2024; Ronald & Arundel, 2023). As such, post-war suburban developments were driven by the idea that housing should primarily house nuclear families, with single-family homes becoming the idealized living arrangement (Fiske & Aalbers, 2020). Contemporary housing policies and mortgage structures continue to favor this family ideal, overlooking alternative tenure models (Ronald & Elsinga, 2012). Additionally, families have become central economic agents in the housing market (Ronald & Arundel, 2023). This marginalizes alternative household structures. Instead, the model is accused of reinforcing gender-based divisions of labor and wealth inequality between generations (Madden & Marcuse, 2016; Ronald & Arundel, 2023). The social imaginary of housing is further influenced by race and class. Examples are practices like redlining in the US (Wachter & Megbolugbe, 1992) and the stigma of social housing in Europe (Risager, 2022). These examples underscore how dominant ideas not only reflect social norms but also actively create them.

2.2.4 Spatial dimension

The spatial dimension of housing involves how housing is organized and designed within the broader urban fabric. In this dimension, housing is not just about individual homes. Instead, houses are part of a wider spatial fabric that influences where people live in relation to services and opportunities (Lefebvre, 1974). Land use patterns and zoning laws are among the factors that shape this dimension. Importantly, these spatial arrangements reflect and recreate social hierarchies. Decisions about space affect who can reach facilities like public transport and green areas. This also interacts with environmental factors such as exposure to pollution, with lower-income groups pushed towards more polluted neighborhoods (Fairburn et al., 2019). Historically, the dominant spatial housing imaginary in (Western) Europe has been shaped by state-led planning models aimed at structured urban expansion, often including social housing and mixed-use cores (Antipova, 2018). However, planning increasingly serves market demands, resulting in gentrification and speculative land use, which usually comes at the expense of socio-spatial equality (van Gent & Hochstenbach, 2020).

Spatial imaginaries, therefore, operate as a form of power by shaping cities and determining who gets to belong where. As Musterd & Ostendorf (1998) argue, spatial segregation is not accidental but the outcome of political decisions. Gentrification and displacement have become central features of contemporary housing politics, whether enabled by state policy or market actors (van Gent, 2013). Harvey's (2001) concept of the 'spatial fix' and Smith's (1996) 'rent gap theory' illustrate how capital exploits the urban landscape, turning it into a site of accumulation that directly or indirectly displaces original communities. Within this dominant ideology, public space is increasingly subject to enclosure. Jacobs (2019) argues that the increased privatization and regulation of once collective spaces further reinforce spatial divisions. Dominant spatial imaginaries help to stabilize dominant housing regimes by making exclusion appear natural or inevitable. Housing, therefore, is more than a physical structure but also a spatial mechanism that organizes urban life.

2.2.5 Physical dimension

The physical dimension of housing refers to its tangible features, such as architectural form and construction methods (Vanags et al., 2017; Aranda, 2024). Beyond the functional purpose of housing, these physical characteristics are shaped by prevailing logics that dictate what housing types are desirable, for whom they should be built, and where they will be placed. In much of the world, the dominant physical imaginary of housing is rooted in market- and cost efficiency. One of the key physical features of modern urban housing is the dominance of compact, high-density blocks (Drozdz et al., 2018). Alongside this increase in density, there has been a greater focus on prefabrication and modular construction as affordable answers to housing shortages and labor market issues (Shibani et al., 2021). Recently, environmental concerns have also gained importance. This, for example, has led to regulations improving energy efficiency and carbon neutrality in new projects (Tozer & Klenk, 2018; Hagbert et al., 2013). This shift reflects a broader change towards sustainable urban development and shows how regimes can be (partially) open to change.

Despite these apparent innovations, the dominant physical imaginary remains resistant to adaptation. Beyond shifting sustainability priorities, it can be argued that efficiency is still prioritized over long-term adaptability. This limits the ability of new developments to accommodate changing social needs (Ronald & Elsinga, 2012). Despite shifting demographics and evolving household compositions, housing design continues to be structured around traditional family compositions, with one-family, multiple-bedroom typologies (Aranda, 2024; Ronald & Arundel, 2023). This generally overlooks universal design principles that accommodate aging populations or disabled residents into mainstream housing developments. Even as alternative housing models become more prevalent, mortgage structures and zoning legislation remain biased towards traditional housing forms (Ronald & Elsinga, 2012). Therefore, physical form is not only a reflection of the dominant housing logics but also an actual barrier to building more inclusive or experimental models. In sum, the physical dimension stabilizes dominant imaginaries by translating normative assumptions onto the built environment, making it harder for alternatives to be realized.

2.2.6 Conclusion: The power of housing imaginaries

Concluding, literature shows that housing is more than a physical object. It is a deeply embedded socio-political construct that is shaped by values and normative assumptions. These dominant imaginaries stabilize existing systems by legitimizing specific forms of housing and urban governance. By mapping the five interrelated dimensions, this framework illustrates how dominant housing imaginaries operate across both material infrastructures and normative meanings. This consolidates regime rigidity and makes it harder for systemic alternatives to gain traction. Understanding the workings of dominant housing imaginaries provides the backdrop against which alternative imaginaries emerge. As mentioned in the introduction, various housing protests and alternative initiatives have emerged in response to alter these dominant assumptions. These initiatives range from cooperative housing, community land trusts, eco-villages, tiny housing, to co-living models. While these are not directly comparable in terms of values and institutional embeddedness, they all express efforts to reconfigure the housing system. Squatting represents one of the most radical expressions of alternatives, operating both with and against the system. The next section builds on this by presenting theories of prefiguration and transition to better understand how alternative imaginaries gain traction within and against the dominant housing regime.

2.3 Socio-Political Transformation

Dominant housing imaginaries thus determine what is seen as possible or desirable through material and immaterial values. Foucault's (1978) concept of governmentality helps to explain this, since power is exercised not primarily through coercion but also through shaping norms and values. This concept shows power as 'governing at a distance' by encouraging individuals to internalize responsibilities and adopt self-regulation behaviors. People are thus not controlled by force but influenced through what they think is normal or civil behavior. This means that they govern themselves to live the way the state wants. Housing policy illustrates this tactic of governance at a distance by producing citizens as homeowners or rent-paying subjects who do not question this status quo. Gramsci's (1971) idea of hegemony strengthens this argument. It shows how dominant ideologies gain acceptance and are seen as common sense. Hegemony works not only through control but also by exerting ideological leadership via institutions or, for example, the media. This process normalizes specific ideas as natural or inevitable. In the housing context, the neoliberal imaginary becomes hegemonic when alternatives are collectively labeled irrational or utopian. These insights help explain why dominant imaginaries are so resistant to change.

However, hegemony is never neutral. Counter-hegemony is described by Gramsci (1971) as the active contestation of the dominant ideology by proposing different ways of organizing society. This is what Gramsci (1971) would call a 'war of position'. This is about building new ways of living within civil society that erode dominant norms from below. To achieve this, it is essential to create cracks in the hegemonic system through moments of contestation. To spatially frame these counter-hegemonies, Lefebvre's (1968) 'right to the city' thesis provides a suitable lens. He conceptualizes urban space as a political arena where inhabitants should have the right to shape and participate in urban life. Therefore, resisting dominant housing imaginaries is a struggle over space itself. Lefebvre (1968) sees abstract space as the space dominated by market forces and the state, serving the needs of capital accumulation, while differential space emerges in opposition to these structures and is shaped by collective resistance. Spatial resistance can, therefore, create or expose cracks in the hegemonic system to fuel a 'war on position'. This creates opportunities for alternatives to emerge and gain legitimacy. To understand this process, the following section connects imaginaries to literature on prefiguration and transition studies.

2.3.1 Prefigurative politics

As shown earlier, imaginaries are more than abstract visions about the future. They can be translated into real-life practices and gain political force. Asara (2020) emphasizes the need for imaginaries to be rooted in everyday practices to gain political force through prefiguration. Prefiguration is usually defined as enacting future visions in the now. Schiller-Merkens (2022) puts this as follows: "Prefiguration is the idea of realizing imaginaries of radically alternative futures in social practices, of bringing about the future by enacting 'concrete' or 'real' utopias in the present" (p. 67). It is about not waiting for institutional change but building alternative infrastructures and enacting alternative visions outside institutional structures (Asara, 2020). These infrastructures are used to model a future society at the micro level and aim to achieve social change through practice (Törnberg, 2021). Davoudi (2023) calls this "performing the not-yet", where planning and politics are not just about end goals but about creating transformative practices that try to facilitate alternative futures in the present.

Figure 2: Schematic illustration of the multi-political approach of prefiguration (adapted from Schiller-Merkens, 2021).

While the concept of prefiguration has been of great interest in academic literature, less attention has been paid to how these practices interact with the dominant regime to drive socio-political change. According to Törnberg (2021), we need a better understanding of the extent to which small-scale, grassroots forms of prefiguration hold transformative potential. One of the scholars connecting prefiguration to social transformation is Schiller-Merkens (2022). She describes prefigurative practices emerging in the cracks and niches of contemporary capitalism as an inherently transformative force. For this, she builds on Wright (2019), who considers state support for prefiguration as crucial for achieving social transformation. While stressing the importance of interaction between prefigurative politics and the socio-political regime for achieving change, Törnberg (2021) highlights potential dilution or co-optation of alternative ideas into the regime. This could result in regime resilience of watered-down adaptations rather than regime transformation (see his transition pathways in Table 2).

To understand the different strategies through which prefigurative practices can interact with the dominant system, Schiller-Merkens (2022) points towards social movement scholarship. These sources indicate that prefigurative movements combine multiple kinds of politics. First, this includes simply resisting dominant structures through activism and protest. Second, prefigurative actions can negotiate their alternatives within existing institutional boundaries. Third, prefigurative practices can aim for total regime change, transforming their alternative into the new dominant system. To achieve this, Schiller-Merkens (2022) argues that prefigurative actors rarely operate in isolation. They need engagement with other forms of politics to organize for transformative change. This includes, for example, combining prefiguration with contentious politics, such as protest. But also, institutional politics, which includes negotiation with state actors. Her framework, visualized in Figure 2, shows how actors organize within their communities, between allied movements, and across institutional boundaries. This research adopts this multi-political approach to prefiguration as an analytical lens.

Transition pathway	Definition
Reproduction	Alternatives remain marginal or suppressed, regime persists.
Adaptation	Regime adjusts, often co-opting alternatives without altering core logic.
Reconfiguration	Alternatives infiltrate and slowly reshape the regime.
De-/realignment	Regime collapse leads to the rise of new configurations.
Substitution	A mature niche replaces the regime amid strong landscape pressures.

Table 2: Transition pathways for socio-political regime change (Törnberg, 2021)

2.3.2 Transition pathways & MLP

To better understand how prefigurative practices can move from resisting the dominant order to potentially transforming it, Törnberg (2021) suggests linking them to transition theory (Geels, 2002). While usually applied to technological, or more recently, sustainability transitions (Geels, 2011), Törnberg interprets Geels' (2002) Multi-Level Perspective framework to fit socio-political transitions. In line with the original MLP framework (Geels, 2002) (see Figure 3), Törnberg (2021) distinguishes three interconnected levels through which transformation occurs:

- **Landscape** (macro-level): This refers to broad, structural developments that lie primarily outside the control of individual actors. These external structural challenges exert pressure on the regime. Examples include economic crises, cultural shifts, or demographic changes.
- **Regime** (meso-level): The (socio-political) regime represents the dominant set of rules that stabilize the current system. This includes the norms, institutions, policies, and infrastructures that stabilize the regime. This regime usually resists change, but internal fragmentation or external landscape pressures can expose cracks in the system.
- **Niches** (micro-level): Niches are marginal spaces where alternative practices and radical imaginaries develop. Törnberg (2021) refers to them as 'free spaces' where prefigurative politics can be experimented with outside of direct regime pressures. Although small in scale, niches can become crucial incubators for systemic alternatives, especially when landscape pressures destabilize the regime.

To achieve transformation, a 'window' of opportunity needs to be leveraged. According to Geels (2002), "radical innovations break out of the niche-level when ongoing processes at the levels of regime and landscape create a 'window of opportunity'" (p. 1262). Therefore, he argues that the alignment of MLP levels determine if a regime shift will occur. Even when cracks in the system emerge from landscape shocks or regime contradictions, Törnberg (2021) argues that there are different transition pathways through which prefigurative politics can interact with the regime (see Table 2). His typology shows that small acts of resistance can become seeds for systemic reconfiguration. However, not all alternatives lead to transformation. Some alternatives simply get absorbed within the dominant regime. To go beyond binary success versus failure thinking, Törnberg's (2021) transition pathways offer a nuanced framework for understanding the dynamic ways in which transformation can occur. In addition to Schiller-Merkens' (2022) multi-political approach, this research adapts the MLP and transition pathways as analytical lenses to show how prefiguration can have an influence both inside and outside the dominant system.

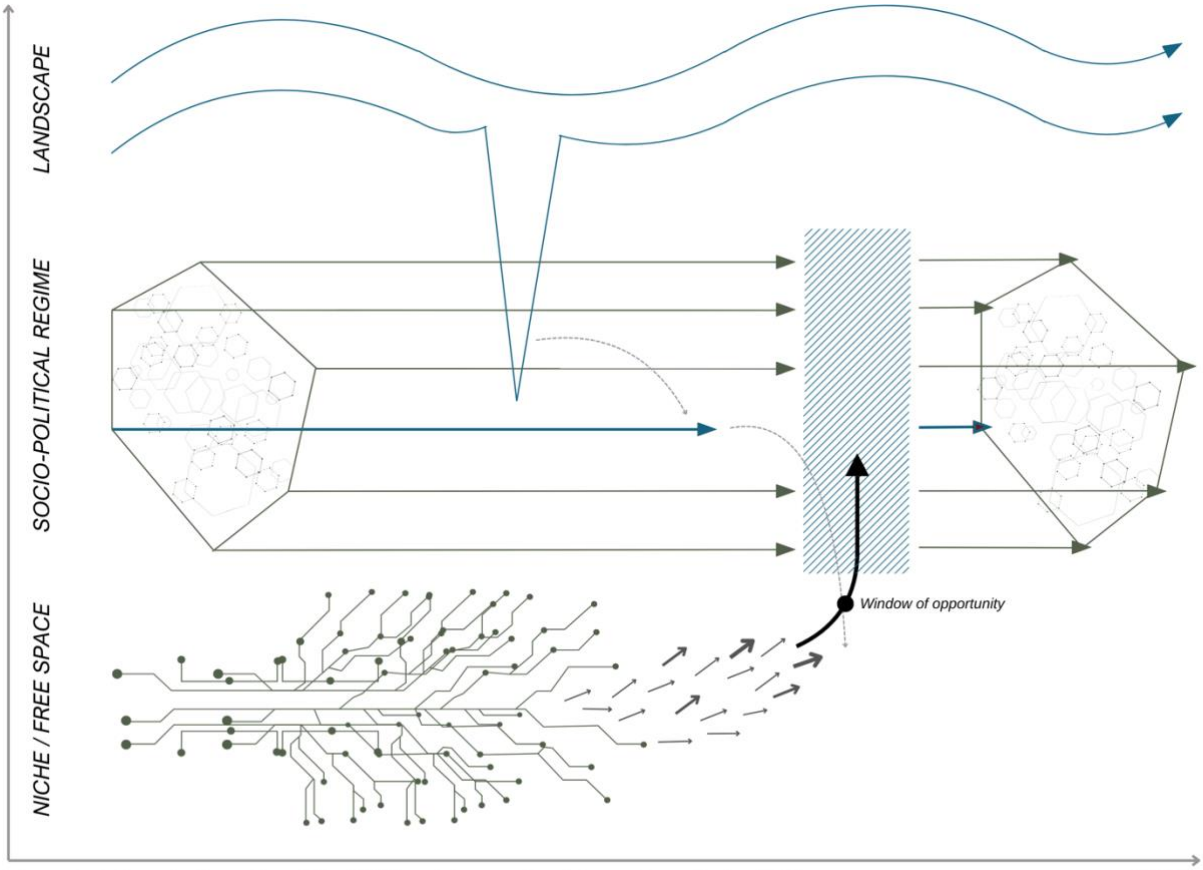


Figure 3: Schematic illustration of the Multi Level Perspective (adapted from Geels, 2002).

2.3.3 Conclusion: Squatting as prefigurative action

Squatting offers an interesting phenomenon to study the relevance of imaginaries. Frequently dismissed as an oppositional or temporary strategy, squatting is increasingly recognized as a prefigurative practice that turns their critique into constructing lived alternatives (Törnberg, 2021). By occupying and repurposing vacant buildings, squatting movements not only challenge dominant housing logics but also experiment with alternative forms of urban living, such as collective governance structures (Canedo & Andrade, 2021). These practices reflect Asara's (2020) understanding of radical imaginaries. While radical in intent, they are grounded in everyday action. They aim to build alternatives embedded in broader struggles for systemic change. This shows how squatting does not operate in isolation. Drawing on Schiller-Merkens' (2022) multi-political approach, prefiguration can be used to complement a range of political tactics. This can be illustrated using the example of squatting. In some cases, squatting movements have successfully engaged in legal battles to secure housing rights, leading to formalized autonomous districts like Christiania in Copenhagen (Coppola & Vanolo, 2014). These cases show how grassroots initiatives can shift from oppositional to hybrid strategies that reshape regime logics from within, while still trying to retain elements of autonomy. However, as this research will show, squatting can also act as an inspiring alternative from outside the system, through acts of 'engaged withdrawal'.

From a transition studies perspective, squatting can be understood as a niche or 'free space' within the MLP. This is the space where innovations are incubated outside of regime pressures (Törnberg, 2021). Whether these practices remain marginal or drive actual change depends on multiple factors, including their ability to scale and to form alliances. Squatting offers insights into how imaginaries grow from vision to practice through multiple transition pathways. Additionally, from an imaginaries perspective, squatting embodies the combination of material and immaterial struggle. By creating autonomous housing commons, self-managed social centers, or counter-narratives to commodified housing, these movements make the possibility of alternative housing futures visible and viable (Ballesteros-Quilez et al., 2022). Although recent years have seen a growing interest in more institutionalized alternatives such as housing cooperatives (also known as co-ops), co-living models, and tiny house movements, squatting remains of interest as it operates at the edges of legality. It exposes the securitization of dominant regimes and creates experimental spaces that more formalized alternatives may not reach. As Törnberg (2021) notes, there remains a gap in understanding how bottom-up prefigurative practices relate to socio-political transitions. Studying squatting through the lens of imaginaries, prefiguration, and transition theory allows us to explore not only the alternative but also its transformative potential.

2.4 Conceptual Framework

The earlier explained theoretical concepts are tied together in the conceptual model presented in Figure 4. The figure can be used to trace how the concepts are connected and to analyze how the alternative imaginaries of squatting movements challenge dominant housing narratives. First, the framework visualizes a contested space where housing manifests across five dimensions: financial, political, social, spatial, and physical. At the center of this research lies squatting, conceptualized as a prefigurative practice. Rather than treating squatting as oppositional, the framework captures it as a strategic practice operating through three overlapping pathways: resistance, negotiation, and, potentially, transformation. These prefigurative pathways are informed by Schiller-Merkens' (2022) multi-political approach and Törnberg's (2021) transition pathways. Through this, the model provides a lens to assess how alternative housing movements contest existing structures and engage with institutions to transform the housing landscape. The operationalization of this conceptual model both guided the coding of empirical material and the interpretation of how imaginaries are enacted and potentially institutionalized. By combining these theoretical elements into a single conceptual model, the framework allows for a multi-layered understanding of the material and immaterial dimensions of the imaginary and its transformative potential.

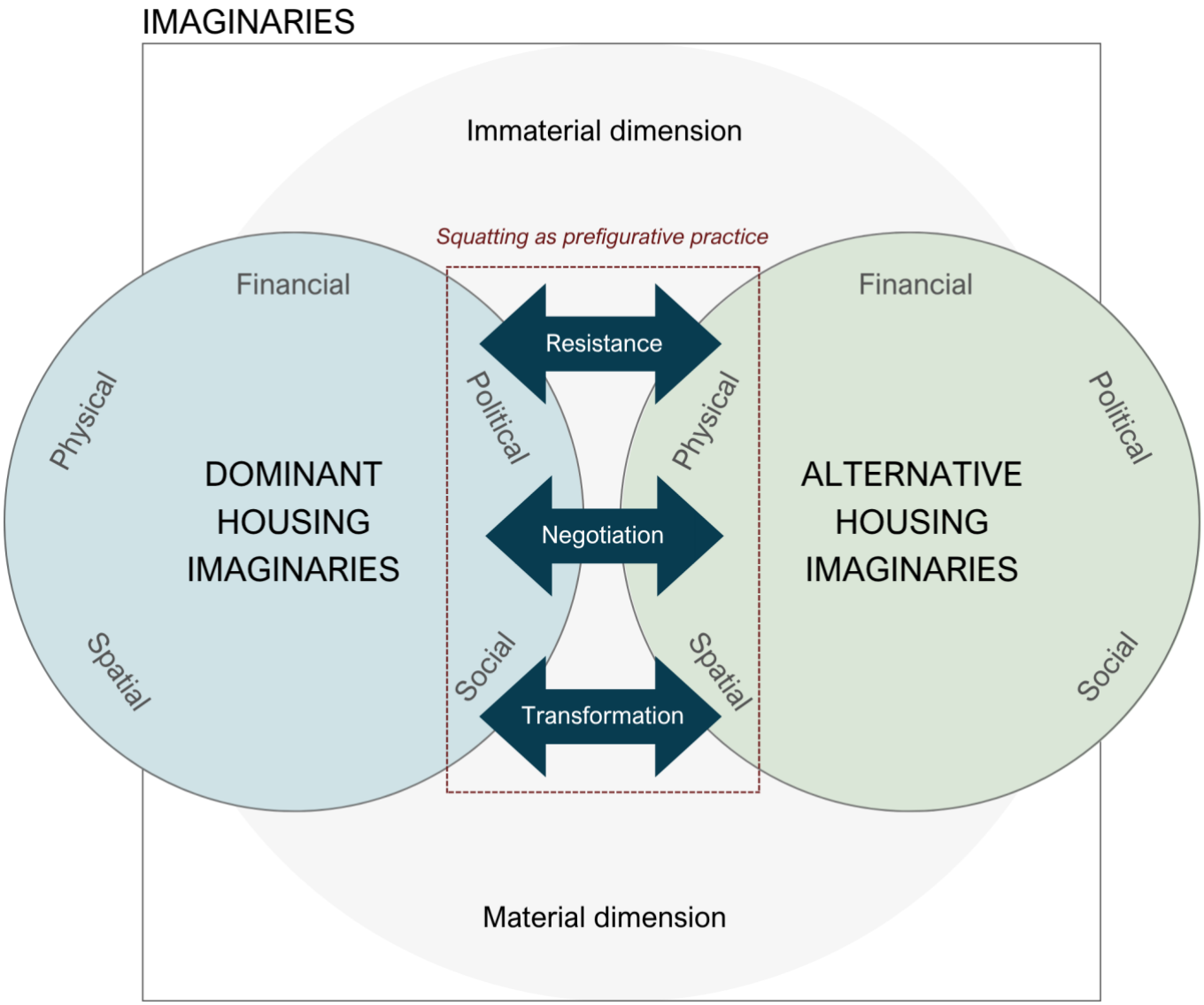


Figure 4: Conceptual framework

3 Methodology

This research uses a multi-method qualitative approach that combines different methods to explore the transformative potential of alternative housing ideas in Amsterdam. The study is rooted in critical urban studies and draws on both interpretivist and materialist social science traditions. In short, this means it focuses on urban power structures that appear through both immaterial and material aspects. The research combines several methods, including historical analysis, thematic content analysis, semi-structured interviews, and policy analysis. Using these data sources allows for an interdisciplinary look at both the content and the institutional dynamics of alternative housing imaginaries in the context of Amsterdam.

3.1 Epistemology & research design

The research is grounded in interpretivist and materialist epistemologies. It recognizes that housing imaginaries are constructed through both material and immaterial dimensions. In line with critical urban theory, it highlights the unequal nature of neoliberal power relations and their impact on the spatial fabric (Brenner, 2009). Therefore, this study places housing imaginaries within broader struggles over the production of space (Lefebvre, 1974). Adopting an interpretivist approach highlights the importance of how imaginaries are shaped through immaterial factors such as symbolism and discourse. Beyond this, the research also acknowledges the materialist tradition of social sciences, emphasizing the importance of infrastructures and material factors in realizing alternatives. This innovative dual lens enables an analysis at the intersection of material and immaterial dimensions. In this context, prefiguration serves both a narrative of alternative possibilities and a real intervention in the urban setting. By merging these views, the research examines how squatting movements challenge mainstream housing stories and actively enact different urban futures.

This study is designed as a theoretically informed case study of Amsterdam. The urban context is understood as a critical site where dominant and alternative housing imaginaries are actively produced. While the empirical focus lies on a single city, the research adopts a multi-scalar approach, examining how imaginaries emerge at the grassroots level (micro level), are enacted through spatial practices (meso level), and interact with or are constrained by institutional frameworks (macro level). The justification for focusing on Amsterdam aligns with Yin's (2014) understanding of case study research as a suitable method for understanding social phenomena within their real-world context. However, the study will not purely be descriptive, but empirically and theoretically informed. So, while Amsterdam is the primary focus, the findings may have implications for understanding housing politics and their transformative potential elsewhere. Therefore, analytical generalization (Yin, 2014) allows this study to contribute to the broader field of urban and housing studies. Through this form of theoretical transferability (Flyvbjerg, 2006), scientific and practical insights have been produced that can also inform other urban contexts beyond Amsterdam. To achieve this, the research is structured around four distinct subquestions:

SQ1 | Situating the imaginary:
How have squatting movements in Amsterdam historically shaped housing imaginaries and influenced urban governance?

SQ2 | Presenting the imaginary:
What alternative housing imaginaries are presented and prefigured by the recent squatting collective Mokum Kraakt, and how do they challenge dominant housing narratives?

SQ3 | Living the imaginary:
How are alternative housing imaginaries lived, governed, and negotiated in practice, and what tensions arise between institutionalization and autonomy?

SQ4 | (Un)locking the imaginary:
Does Amsterdam's policy landscape provide a window of opportunity for alternative housing imaginaries to transform dominant regime logics?

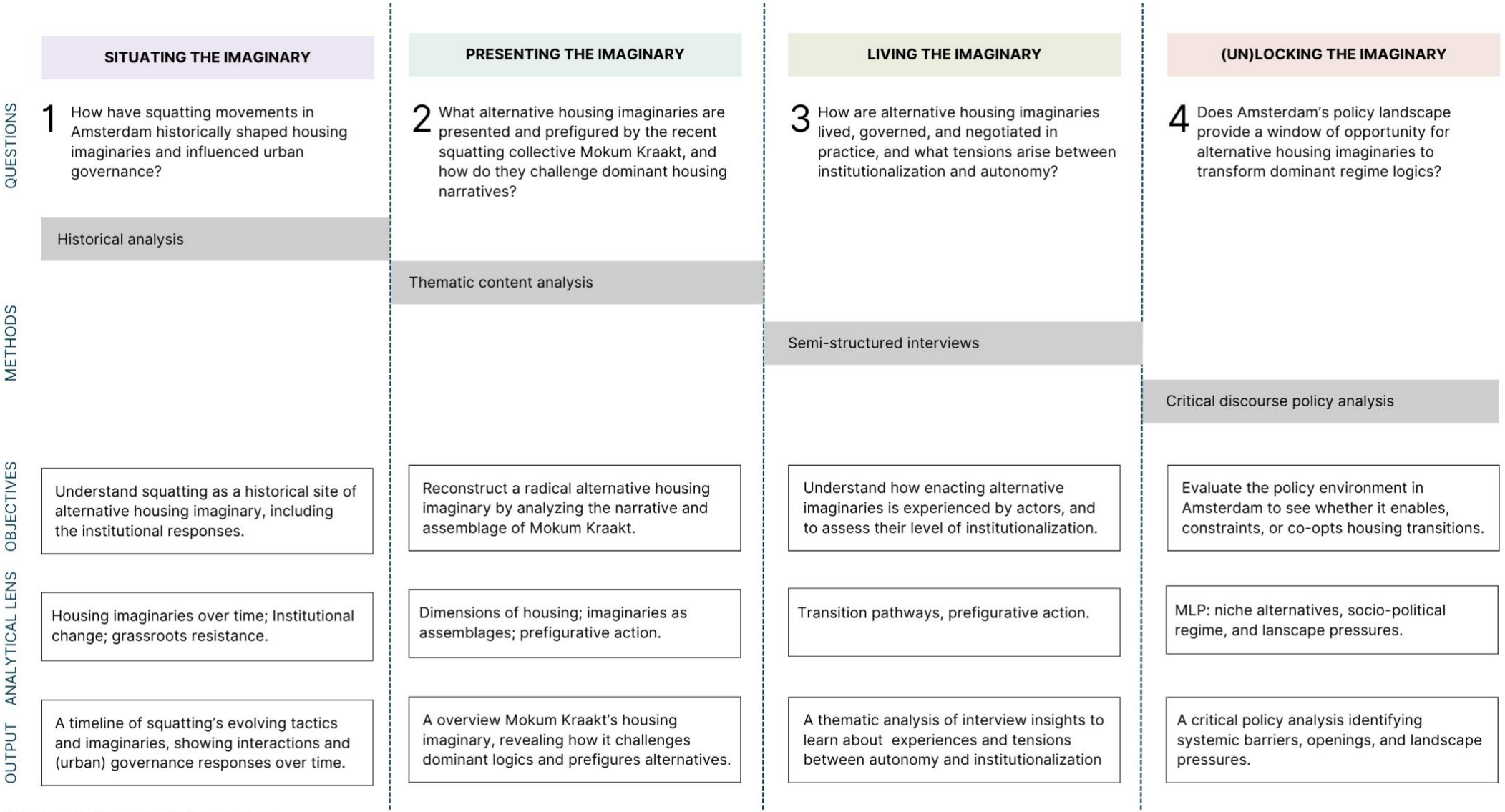


Figure 5: Research flow chart

3.2 Data collection

The study was designed to provide interdisciplinary insights into the narratives and strategies of squatting movements. To achieve this, it adopts a multi-method qualitative research strategy structured around four subquestions. Each question focuses on a specific aspect of alternative housing imaginaries, ranging from historical impact to contemporary policy. The data was collected between March and June 2025, during which the housing crisis and affordability debates were central to the Dutch political and public agenda (Kellij & Hilhorst, 2023). This context underscored the urgency and relevance of the research and was a recurring topic that shaped the interview conversations. To guide the data collection, each subquestion is answered using specific sources and methods. Figure 5 provides a visual overview of the connection between the research questions and the methods used. Additionally, the following sections explain the methods more in depth.

3.2.1 SQ1 | Situating the imaginary

For this question, data collection centered around archival materials, (academic) literature, and media documentation of key squatting moments in Amsterdam. The primary source for this was The State Archives (Het Staatsarchief, n.d.), an extensive online repository of materials about squatting and urban movements in the Netherlands. This was complemented with academic literature and selected media reports that provided more information. Instead of offering a complete chronological history, the goal was to highlight key activist moments and institutional responses that have helped shape ideas about housing. These key moments were chosen for their visibility and influence on institutional reactions. Examining these moments provided a necessary historical context to understand how housing and urban policy have been challenged over the decades and how squatting has served as a consistent force of imagination and resistance. Eventually, a timeline was created by organizing key moments thematically while showing the link between key moments and institutional responses.

3.2.2 SQ2 | Presenting the imaginary

For the second question, the focus shifts to the narratives of modern squatting movements. For this, data collection centers on a thematic content analysis of public materials produced by the squatting collective Mokum Kraakt. As one of the most visible and active squatting movements in Amsterdam in the last five years, Mokum Kraakt was selected due to its visible role in articulating contemporary housing imaginaries through both physical action and social media. The materials analyzed include their Instagram posts (@MokumKraakt, n.d.), the 'Take Mokum Back' book (Mokum Kraakt, 2023), and the Hotel Mokum documentary (Meijman, 2023). These sources were gathered from public online platforms and were chosen for their richness in discourse, in the absence of considerable interview potential. These materials formed the empirical basis for analyzing alternative housing imaginaries in the present and comparing these to the insights from the historical analysis from SQ1. A more detailed overview of the process behind this is included in Appendix 2.

3.2.3 SQ3 | Living the imaginary

This question draws on semi-structured interviews to explore how alternative housing imaginaries are enacted and negotiated in practice. The interviews provide insights into the lived realities of individuals who actively shape or inhabit alternative housing models in Amsterdam that are rooted in urban struggle. This includes (former) squatters, residents of legalized squats or housing experiments, and experts. The interviews focus on how these actors see alternative living, how they navigate tensions between autonomy and institutionalization, and whether they believe in upscaling their imaginary. Interviewees were selected through purposive sampling by emailing activists and initiatives directly and aiming for varied roles, experiences, and perspectives. Five in-depth interviews were conducted. For more information and a sample interview guide, see Appendix 1. The semi-structured format of the interviews allowed for an open conversation while maintaining a shared thematic structure across interviews. To compensate for the small interview sample, the interviews conducted were extensive and resulted in rich insights. Several participants contributed insights from both lived experience and professional or activist perspectives, offering valuable reflections when triangulated with other questions and data sources.

3.2.4 SQ4 | (Un)locking the imaginary

This question draws on critical discourse analysis of key housing and planning policy documents in Amsterdam to investigate the institutional landscape in which alternative housing imaginaries are either constrained or enabled. The selected materials range from strategic urban documents to specific housing policies, programmatic policies, and regulatory measures. The selected documents were chosen for their central role in shaping the city's long-term housing vision and spatial governance strategies. Some documents were included through snowballing to include references to other policy documents. A complete overview of the policy documents included is included in Appendix 3.

3.3 Data analysis

The empirical materials used for this study were mainly analyzed using qualitative thematic coding, combining deductive and inductive strategies (Bryman, 2016). Deductive coding was guided by the study's conceptual framework and relevant literature on housing. At the same time, inductive coding was used to identify patterns across interviews, allowing space for grounded, context-specific insights. Coding was carried out iteratively, with regular memo-writing to reflect on analytical choices and evolving interpretations. Unless stated otherwise, all written and visual data have been systematically managed and analyzed using Atlas.ti software. Coding was conducted independently by the researcher, which introduces potential interpretive bias (Bryman, 2016). To strengthen analytical transparency, coding decisions and thematic patterns were regularly reflected upon. Additionally, all major coding frameworks are documented in Appendices 2 and 3. The following tailored strategies were used for each subquestion:

- For SQ1, archival and media sources were chronologically organized into key moments using Microsoft Excel. To reveal shifting narratives and tactics, they were inductively grouped into temporal categories. Next, key institutional responses were added, allowing the construction of a timeline that traces the evolving dynamics between squatting and urban governance.
- For SQ2, the Mokum Kraakt materials were deductively coded using two cycles of pre-established categories from the literature on housing dimensions and imaginaries (see Appendix 2). In the first cycle, data were coded using the predefined thematic dimensions of housing, while the second cycle focused on the material and immaterial aspects of the imaginary. Finally, the coding scheme was refined with inductive additions as new empirical themes emerged.
- For SQ3, interview transcripts were analyzed using inductive thematic coding. Since the interviews were open-ended, inductive coding emphasized emergent themes related to lived experience, autonomy, institutional cooperation, and governance (see Appendix 1). This inductive approach ensured that the interviewees' own interpretations remained central to the analysis.
- For SQ4, the selected policy documents were analyzed using deductive coding. The coding scheme was informed by the MLP framework (Geels, 2002) and Fairclough's (1995) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (see Appendix 3). The MLP provided a systematic lens to identify the different levels of transformation. Additionally, the CDA offered insights into how discourse legitimizes policy choices. Combining these approaches allowed to trace how institutional language facilitated or constrained alternative housing imaginaries to gain traction.

3.4 Trustworthiness, limitations & ethical considerations

To ensure trustworthiness, this research follows the four criteria for qualitative research as outlined by Lincoln & Guba (1985): credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

- Credibility can be defined as the accuracy of the findings. This is about reflecting the participants' realities to the researchers' best ability (Bryman, 2016). This study enhances credibility through methodological triangulation (Bryman, 2016) allowing cross-verifying findings from multiple perspectives. Additionally, the qualitative approach provides a 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973), referring to a detailed and context-specific description of a social phenomenon. Finally, clear data-collection protocols and regularly consulting supervisors enhanced the credibility of this research.
- Transferability refers to how findings can be applied to other contexts (Bryman, 2016). While this research is context-specific to Amsterdam, it can contribute to broader discussions on alternative housing imaginaries and socio-political transformation. This follows the logic of theoretical transferability (Flyvbjerg, 2006). The goal here was to achieve analytical generalization (Yin, 2014), making findings useful for academics and policymakers in housing governance beyond Amsterdam.

- Dependability ensures that the research process is documented in a way that it is traceable and can be reproduced with similar insights (Bryman, 2016). To achieve this, the research maintains a clear methodological framework and systematic documentation of the data collection and analysis. A structured data collection and coding approach improves transparency (Bryman, 2016).
- Confirmability ensures that findings are shaped by the data rather than by researcher bias or preconceptions (Bryman, 2016). While acknowledging personal biases and positionality in the next section, using multiple data sources aims to minimize these biases. Finally, documenting the analysis processes, as included in the appendices, further ensures transparency.

Despite aligning with the trustworthiness criteria, the research faced limitations related to data access, representation, and generalizability. Political sensitivities and access constraints to squatting communities limit the availability of firsthand insights. To compensate for this, interviews with residents from legalized alternatives were also conducted. However, the interview sample was relatively small, with only five interviews conducted. Most interviewees rejected the interview request due to time constraints. Therefore, a thematic content analysis was conducted to gain insights into the narratives and strategies of contemporary squatters. Given the topic's sensitivity, the study followed ethical guidelines to protect research participants and ensure integrity. Informed consent was obtained from interviewees, and confidentiality measures, like a data-management plan, were implemented to protect the respondents. Anonymity was maintained at all times. Overall, this research followed the ethical guidelines of the MADE program.

As mentioned earlier, as a case study of Amsterdam, the findings may not be fully generalizable to other urban contexts. However, they offer valuable insights and theoretical transferability regarding discussions on housing imaginaries and urban resistance (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Researcher reflexivity is employed to address biases critically. The aim was to ensure that the research represents alternative housing imaginaries fairly while acknowledging the power dynamics in play. Therefore, it is crucial to be aware of my situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988). As a student concerned about the ongoing housing crisis, I recognize my own potential biases. Additionally, my study background enforced my interest in more inclusive and sustainable housing solutions. This not only informed my choice of topic, but also the way I engaged with interviewees and the analysis of materials.

Being aware of these preconceptions guided me in reflecting on how my personal perspective shapes the interpretation of the data. Rather than seeking a natural view of squatting, this research embraces the situated perspective that foregrounds marginalized urban actors. In line with Haraway (1988), this is not necessarily a limitation, but also a strength to expose blind spots in dominant narratives. At the same time, triangulation was used to achieve balanced and nuanced research outcomes. Additionally, analytical memos during coding and interpretations helped to trace how my positionality may have shaped the meanings I assigned. I regularly revisited these reflections while analyzing and interpreting data. Finally, I discussed my interpretations with supervisors and peers to ensure grounded insights.

4 Results

4.1 Situating the imaginary

A historical analysis of squatting and urban resistance in Amsterdam

Subquestion 1: How have squatting movements in Amsterdam historically shaped housing imaginaries and influenced urban governance?

The city of Amsterdam is well-known for its history of squatting and urban movements. This chapter presents a historical analysis of squatting in Amsterdam to examine how alternative housing imaginaries have emerged and evolved over time. Rather than providing a complete history, this analysis focuses on key squatting movements and related institutional responses as empirical evidence to answer the question of how squatting has historically shaped housing imaginaries and urban governance. The historical analysis relies primarily on archival materials from the Staatsarchief (State Archive) (n.d.), which is an extensive collection of Dutch squatting and activist documents. It also references a book about the history of squatting by Duivenvoorden (2012) and additional media articles. The analysis reveals the cyclical dynamics between activism and institutional power and helps to explain why squatting has evolved into a marginalized practice. This chapter analyzes the evolution of squatting through six thematically constructed phases and translates this into a timeline. By studying these historical patterns, this chapter demonstrates how squatting has served as a persistent, yet contested, force in reimagining housing and shaping urban governance. Additionally, the chapter sets the stage for understanding whether recent movements might carry transformative potential.

4.1.1 **Phase 1** | Emerging resistance (1960s)

Squatting in Amsterdam originated from a mix of material necessity and early forms of resistance. The squatting movement began in the mid-1960s with Jan and Babische van Hoften, who were the first registered squatters, occupying a house on the Generaal Vetterstraat (van Lonkhuyzen, 2014). Instead of a political protest, their action was an act of necessity. Like many other young couples, they had a hard time finding affordable housing because of the city's post-war housing crisis. These first actions were often personal and not political. However, they set the stage for a larger movement that questioned the legitimacy of vacancy during a housing crisis. Simultaneously, the Provo movement brought politics into the conversation with their *Witte Huizenplan* (White Houses Plan, a proposal to reclaim vacant buildings for public use). This connected squatting to broader critiques of extractive urban development. Their proposals, such as occupying the Royal Palaces, used activism to highlight how the city mismanaged its space (Provo, 1966). In 1969, the mix of political critique and necessity led to more organized forms of squatting. This resulted in the establishment of *Woningburo de Kraker* (Squatter's Housing Agency) and the publication of a 'squatting manual'. These developments marked a shift towards increased organization that legitimized the movement (Duivenvoorden, 2012). These changes marked the starting point of squatting as a valid response to failures in the housing system.

4.1.2 **Phase 2** | Neighborhood mobilization (1970s)

The 1970s saw the rise of unified movements like Aktie'70 and the growth of squatting into a national phenomenon during the National Squatting Day in 1970 (Duivenvoorden, 2012). Squatting was no longer just about safeguarding housing. It became a way to reclaim the city from vacancy and technocratic planning. A key change in Amsterdam was the rise of neighborhood-based movements, with Aktiegroep Nieuwmarkt being a famous example. This movement used squatting as a strategy to fight against top-down urban renewal projects. Plans for demolition and the construction of highways threatened the neighborhood's integrity (VPRO, 2015). Their coordination efforts included illegal radio stations and street newspapers. Following mass evictions, the Nieuwmarkt Riots in 1975 marked a turning point. Thousands of protesters clashed with the police as they resisted evictions by barricading streets and buildings. These clashes led to a national discussion about urban renewal and encouraged a policy shift towards community-sensitive urban planning (*bouwen voor de buurt*) (van Spaendonck & Stork, 2022). These new planning methods focused on renovation, participation, and facilitating community needs as a way to contrast with previous top-down modernist approaches. Through this success, squatters established themselves as legitimate actors in urban governance. This further inspired a new wave of activists who turned squatting into a coordinated political movement.

4.1.3 **Phase 3** | Confrontation & negotiation (late 1970s-1980s)

This phase marked the peak of the movement's visibility and influence, as well as the start of its internal fragmentation. According to the materials in the State Archive (Staatsarchief, n.d.), by the late 1970s, squatting had developed into a mass movement with associated support networks. These included *kraakspreekuren* (squatting info hours), legal aid, and dedicated media channels. Tactics became more confrontational, fueled by government inaction in the face of rising housing needs. The clashes in 1979 at the Groote Keijser building marks a key movement. The squatters influenced a political crisis by highlighting the governmental failures in tackling housing shortages (Duivenvoorden, 2012). Later, the eviction of a building on the Vondelstraat in 1980 led to massive protests. The squatters now violently defended their occupied spaces. For the first time since WWII, military tanks and armored personnel were employed in a Dutch city (Goedegebuure et al., 2019). These confrontations ultimately led to the Coronation Riots on April 30, where thousands protested under the slogan *Geen Woning, Geen Kroning* (No Housing, No Coronation).

The violent clashes of the early 1980s showed not just anger about the housing crisis but also frustration with governmental policy and repression against activists. This was accompanied by broader anti-capitalist and anti-establishment sentiments. Through mass organization, squatting had now become a real political power and a challenge to the dominant urban order. To stabilize this order, increased confrontations paradoxically opened pathways for institutional negotiations. Even as violent clashes continued, like those around De Grote Wetering and Lucky Luyk (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2019c), the municipality started to engage in negotiations. The offer to exchange the Wijers building for alternative space for the squatting community was turned down. However, this signaled the first shift towards negotiation. Further negotiations led to the legalization of *woonwerkpanden* (mixed live-work buildings, typically under collective or cooperative management) (Duivenvoorden, 2012). In response to rising confrontations and supportive public discourse, squatters were now increasingly included as stakeholders in negotiations over urban space. However, this change also signaled the start of internal divisions between radical and moderate factions within the movement, with more radical parts rejecting negotiation opportunities in the light of desired autonomy.

4.1.4 **Phase 4** | Institutional co-optation (late 1980s-2000s)

The late 1980s marked a legal turning point. Due to a more conservative national discussion about reasserting control, the 1987 Vacancy Law aimed to balance squatting and vacancy regulation but ended up retaining only anti-squatting measures in the final version (Duivenvoorden, 2012). These measures allowed for anonymous evictions and reduced the legal timeframe for occupation. While squatting stayed technically legal under certain conditions, its ability to propose and enact viable housing alternatives shrank due to the short eviction timelines. The 1993 Housing Act further criminalized squatting for properties that had been vacant for less than a year (Duivenvoorden, 2012). Even though this contributed to the movement's decline, parts of the squatting movement remained, especially in cultural spaces like NDSM and OT301. These places held onto visions of collective and non-commercial urban use but increasingly functioned as a counter-cultural force rather than a political one. In response, the municipality rolled out the *broedplaatsenbeleid* (creative incubator policy), which temporarily legalized and subsidized certain sites to allow affordable spaces for artists (Duivenvoorden, 2012). Although these sites emerged from squatting culture, many activists viewed this new policy as a co-optation of the squatter ethos and a push toward gentrification (Draaisma, 2016). This shows the mixed feelings about working with institutions: while squatters inspired new policy ideas, their visions are often reframed to fit the dominant system.

4.1.5 **Phase 5** | Criminalization & decline (2010s)

The 2010 squatting ban marked the final legal turning point. Squatting became a criminal act in all situations, which significantly changed housing activism in the Netherlands (NOS, 2010). Although the movement was already declining, this law changed how people viewed squatting, shifting it from a valid form of resistance to a crime. New anti-squatting measures aimed to deal with vacancy through temporary rental plans, but activists criticized these as state-driven fixes that limited more radical alternatives to change the system (Duivenvoorden, 2012). Protests against the law took place (AT5, 2010), yet many saw this as the official end of the squatting movement. Still, squatting did not disappear as a method of urban resistance.

The migrant squatting group We Are Here, formed in 2012, used squatting as a survival strategy and to criticize the exclusion of undocumented migrants from formal housing (Wij zijn hier, n.d.). However, over time, the movement was gradually absorbed into institutional care systems. This was done by reframing the action as a humanitarian issue rather than a political critique. This limited the power of the collective and showed how institutional responses can weaken opposition by taking control. Cultural squatting also continued, though it became more precarious. Temporary squats like De Valreep and long-standing places like ADM kept alive alternative ideas that focused on autonomy and collective use (Rombouts, 2014; Lotens, 2020). Their eviction, pushed by redevelopment interests, shows a decline in institutional tolerance for non-market uses of space, even for places like ADM that have deep ties to the city's social fabric. Without legal opportunities and limited space for negotiation, squatting remains mainly a symbolic and counter-cultural tactic. Its legacy lives on, but its political impact has lessened in a city increasingly shaped by market forces and securitization.

4.1.6 **Phase 6** | Contemporary relevance (2020s)

Although the 2010 squatting ban is often viewed as the official end of the movement, recent years have shown that squatting still carries symbolic and potential importance, especially amid the current housing issues. As housing shortages grow and affordability decreases, squatting has reemerged as a form of protest. Like earlier movements, recent squatter imaginaries challenge dominant views on property and ownership. However, these movements now face much stricter laws, fewer empty buildings to occupy, and a neoliberal political environment (Mokum Kraakt, 2023). Despite this resurgence and significant media attention, there is less academic interest in more recent squatting movements and their potential to achieve change in a restrictive urban environment. Previous movements have been well-documented, while current narratives and strategies remain understudied. This research fills this gap by looking at the narratives and tactics of the recent collective Mokum Kraakt in the next chapter. The potential of squatting as a tactic for alternative housing is explored by placing recent housing activism within this historical context. While other housing alternatives are emerging, squatting continues to be a grounded practice where alternative ideas are presented, enacted, and sometimes (partially) achieved. Therefore, more recent squatting actions deserve academic attention.

4.1.7 Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, it is shown that squatting movements have consistently challenged mainstream housing ideas. Squatting has been a tactic to present alternative visions, and, to some extent, influenced policy changes. The views of squatters and activists have changed over time. Initially driven by basic needs, these views expanded into neighborhood struggles, community-driven planning, and a broader demand to claim the right to the city. Eventually, squatting became more connected with cultural and counter-cultural activities. Recently, squatting has reemerged with a returning focus on housing as a fundamental right. This shift shows both the adaptability of squatting and the historical influence it inherits.

The stories and methods of squatting movements evolved over time, as did the responses from institutions. This transformation relates to changes in the political environment and prevailing social narratives. At times, the municipality of Amsterdam opted for negotiation to ease tensions. However, the national government increasingly relied on legal measures to limit squatting. The 1987 Vacancy Law signaled increased law enforcement. Similarly, the center-right coalition passed the squatting ban in 2010, actively framing squatters as criminals. This shows how institutional openness and opportunities for change depend on government conditions, including who is in power and which narratives are dominant.

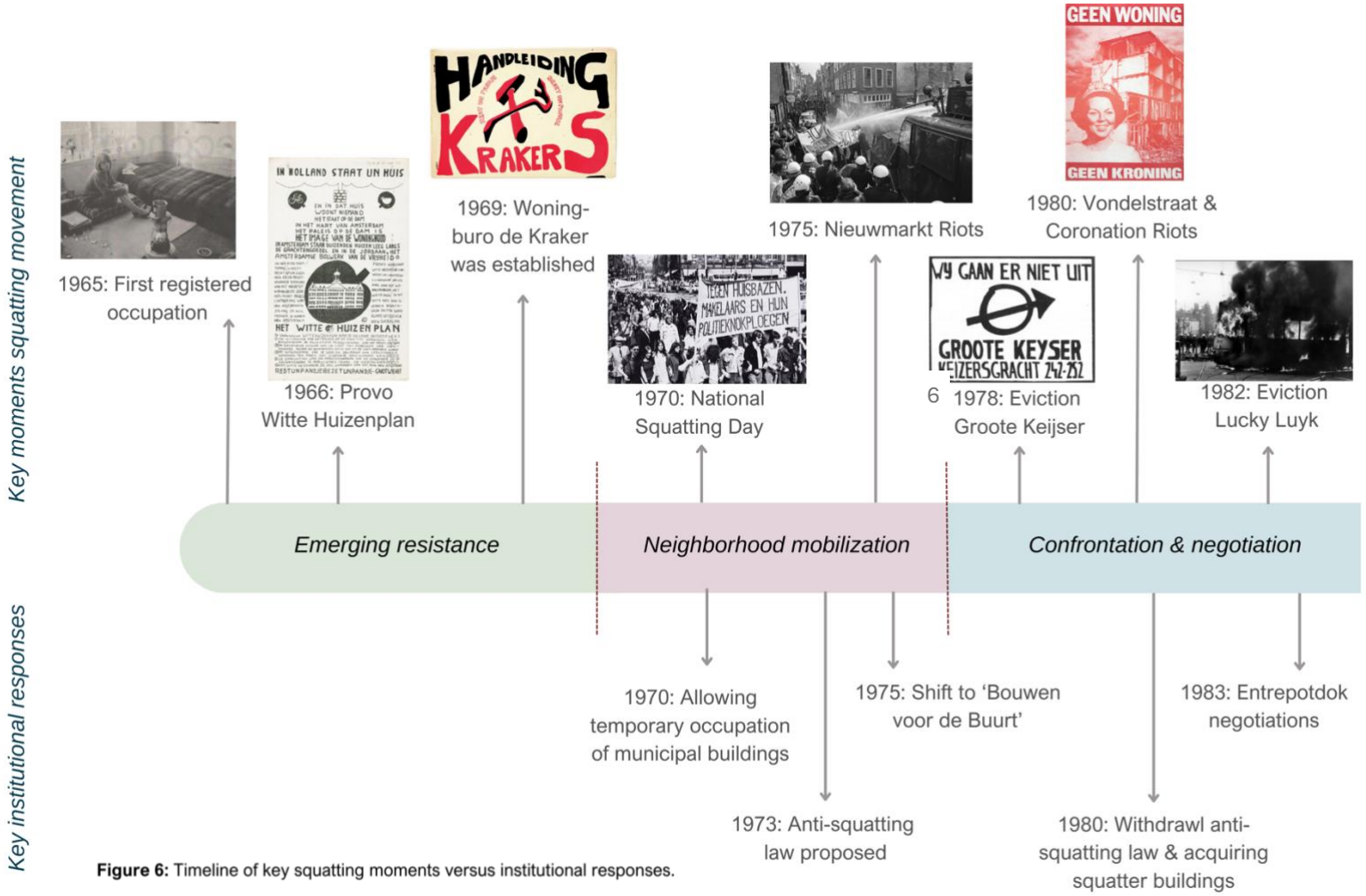
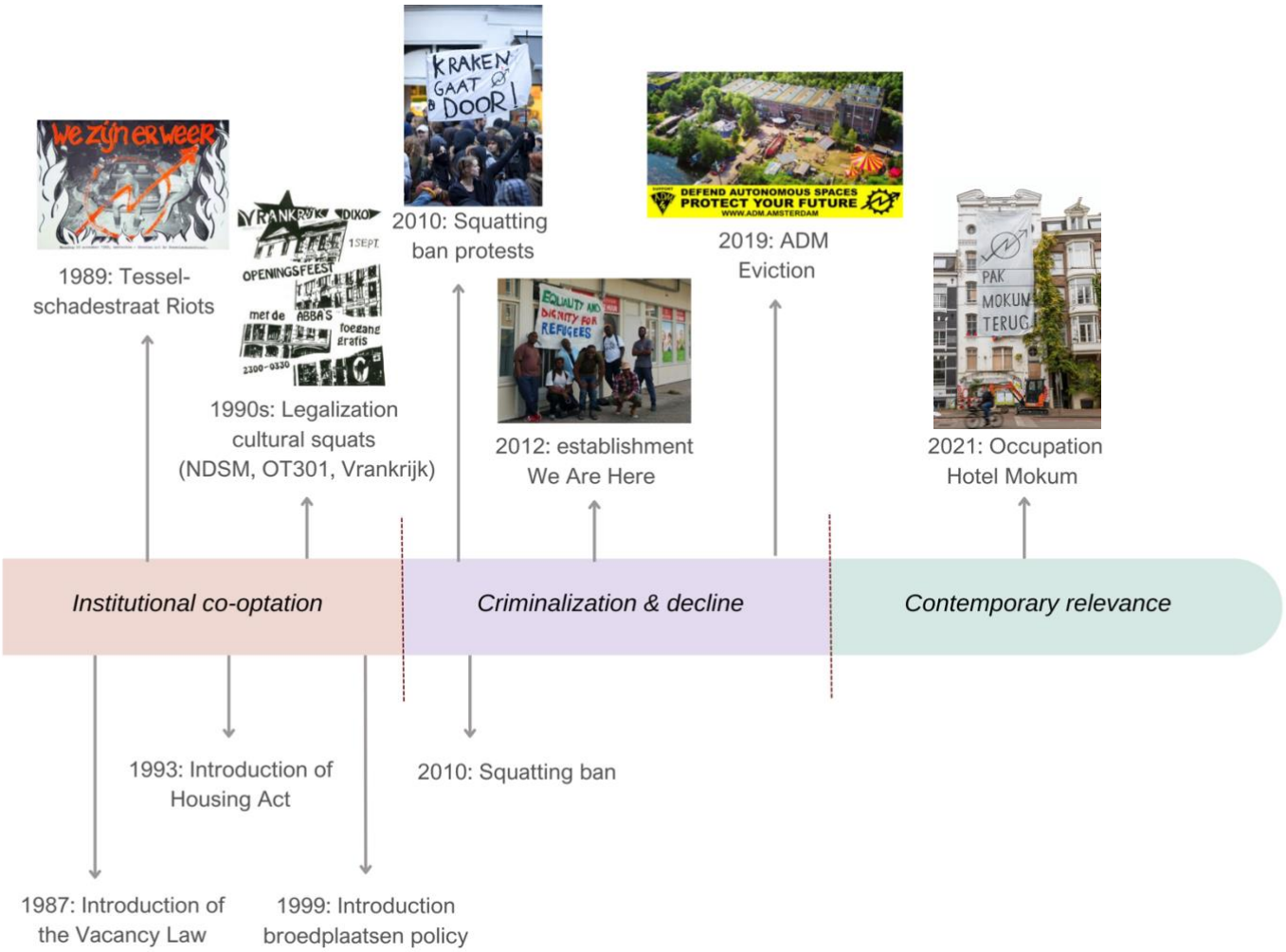


Figure 6: Timeline of key squatting moments versus institutional responses.

1 Photo of Babische van Hoften after the first documented squatting action (van Lonkhuyzen, 2014).
2 Poster for the Provo Witte Huizenplan campaign, demanding to occupy the royal palace amidst housing shortage (Provo, 1966).
3 Poster from Woningburo de Kraker promoting their 'squatting guide' (Canon Sociaal Werk, n.d.)
4 Photo of the 1970 'national squatting day' [against landlords, real estate agents, and their goon squads) (Toepoel, 2020).
5 Photo of the police deploying a water cannon during the Nieuwmarkt riots in 1975 (Pen & Verkerk, 2015).
6 Poster from the Groote Keijser featuring the squatters' symbol and the slogan [we are not leaving] (Canon Sociaal Werk, n.d.).
7 Poster with the slogan [no housing, no coronation] circulated ahead of Queen Beatrix's coronation (Canon Sociaal Werk, n.d.).
8 Photo of a burning tram following the riots during the eviction of Lucky Luyk (Staatsarchief, n.d.)
** Sources (numbered left to right) refer to the websites from which the visuals were retrieved for educational purposes under the right to quote.*

While squatting did not result in a fundamental change in the housing system, it did influence urban policy at key moments. These include a shift toward community-led renewal in the 1970s, the establishment of *woonwerkpanden* in the 1980s, and the *broedplaatsenbeleid* in the 2000s. Academic literature widely recognizes the achievements of Amsterdam's housing movements. Beyond participatory approaches, the accomplishments of historical urban movements also include increased social housing and rental protections (Uitermark, 2009; Pruijt, 2003). Although this legacy persists, the gains have been impacted by neoliberal restructuring, highlighting the continuing need for housing activism (Uitermark, 2009; Rolnik, 2019). Historical insights show how grassroots resistance can create opportunities for change and raise important questions about the conditions under which new housing ideas can gain support today.

In answer to the subquestion, this chapter illustrates that squatting movements in Amsterdam have historically influenced housing imaginaries. They provided alternative perspectives on housing by rejecting vacancy and conventional ownership models, proposing collective living and claiming the right to the city instead. These ideas evolved over time and occasionally succeeded in influencing urban governance toward more community-responsive methods. While these contributions did not lead to major systemic changes, they highlight how grassroots resistance can create opportunities for change, even when facing the risk of being co-opted or reframed.



9 Poster from the Tesselschadestraat squat featuring the squatters' symbol and the slogan [We are back again] (Staatsarchief, n.d.).
10 Poster announcing the opening party of cultural squat Vrankrijk (Staatsarchief, n.d.).
11 Photo of a protest against the squatting ban, featuring the slogan [Squatting continues] (van der Marel, 2010).
12 Photo of the We Are Here migrant squatting collective holding a banner advocating for refugee housing rights (Wij zijn hier, n.d.).
13 Poster of the ADM community asking to defend autonomous spaces in protest against looming eviction (Freedom News, n.d.).
14 Photo of Hotel Mokum with a banner reading [Take back Mokum] (Photo by C. Mudde, retrieved via de Gruyl, 2021).
** Sources (numbered left to right) refer to the websites from which the visuals were retrieved for educational purposes under the right to quote.*

4.2 Presenting the imaginary

A thematic analysis of squatting imaginaries through the case of Mokum Kraakt

Subquestion 2: What alternative housing imaginaries are presented and prefigured by the recent squatting collective Mokum Kraakt, and how do they challenge dominant housing narratives?

"Squatting is, in every sense, an alternative to how we understand the housing crisis. Not only in terms of how we divide housing but also in what we imagine a home to be" (Mokum Kraakt, 2023, p. 333). In the early 2020s, squatting reemerged in Amsterdam as an act of protest and prefiguration in response to a more recent housing crisis. Although formally criminalized in 2010 and since then increasingly faced by securitization and eviction, a new generation of squatters started to reclaim space. The current urban landscape, marked by limited vacancy and an active squatting ban, presents both obstacles and urgency for direct action. Simultaneously, social media has enabled activists to mobilize in ways that extend the reach of their message beyond the occupied buildings. In this context, the squatting collective Mokum Kraakt emerged as a powerful voice in the early 2020s, occupying multiple buildings (including 'Hotel Mokum'). Simultaneously, the collective informed 21 thousand Instagram followers of their actions (@MokumKraakt, n.d.) and published a book and a documentary. Mokum Kraakt, therefore, offers a rich case through which to explore alternative imaginaries in a restrictive urban context. To unpack their imaginary, this chapter examines five interrelated dimensions of housing to understand which alternative visions are presented and prefigured.

4.2.1 **Financial dimension** | Housing as a collective good

For Mokum Kraakt (2023), the financialization of housing is the heart of the problem. They argue that housing as a vehicle for capital accumulation comes at the expense of access, affordability, and solidarity. "The squatting ban [of 2010] cannot be seen separate from the desire of right-wing parties to break all resistance to their anti-democratic housing market agenda. Central to this was the abandonment of public housing, and its replacement with a liberalized housing market where investors were given free rein" (p. 56). Squatting, therefore, is framed as a democratic rupture in urban capital circulation, reclaiming space for social use. The collective fundamentally rejects private property, describing ownership as a mechanism of exclusion: "We want to abolish private property so that everything is for everyone" (p. 25). Instead, they advocate for a commons-based logic where "housing is not owned or inherited, but based on participation, presence, and collective practice" (p. 129). This vision extends to a broader critique of the commodified city, describing Amsterdam as a "theme park for mass tourism", where commercialization replaces public life (p. 55). Hotel Mokum, in this context, became an "alternative space outside and against the commercialization of everything" (p. 25). In sum, Mokum Kraakt's financial imaginary envisions a city where homes are collective resources rather than commodities, reframing value as relational and use-based, rather than exploitative.

4.2.2 **Political dimension** | Reclaiming the right to the city

Mokum Kraakt (2023) frames housing as a deeply political issue. According to them, it is not a matter of technical or supply failure but rooted in systemic exclusion and democratic erosion. They describe the housing crisis as not an unintended consequence but as a result of deliberate policy choices: "It is also important to realize that market failure is primarily a political failure, a failure of the elites, who have transformed housing into a market that cannot meet people's basic needs" (p. 168). Central to their imaginary is the idea of the right to the city, the collective right of residents to shape urban life and access space. "What it is really about when we reclaim Mokum is the right to the city: the right of residents to shape life in the city. And that is why we squat" (p. 25). This vision directly politicizes the housing discourse and celebrates grassroots control over urban futures. By rejecting traditional forms of institutional participation, the collective celebrates protest, direct action, and civil disobedience: "The time of asking for permission was over, the time had come to reclaim what belongs to us" (p. 23). Occupied buildings are, therefore, sites of political expression and autonomous governance. Their political imaginary envisions housing as a human right and collective governance as a mode of urban democracy.

4.2.3 **Social dimension** | Practices of collective care

Mokum Kraakt (2023) reimagines housing not as a private unit for commodification but as a space for collective use and care. Their social imaginary centers around inclusion, collective decision-making, and rejecting normative family structures. Within squatted spaces, care is decoupled from biological or legal ties and redefined through mutual support: "The care tasks in this collective seem to be evenly distributed, assuming that everyone is equal. (...) This is completely different from how a 'normal' household works, where hierarchy shapes social conventions" (p. 333). Housing, in this sense, becomes both a necessity and an infrastructure for organizing community: "We needed living space, of course. But squatting also meets other needs. We need a place to organize ourselves, host events, distribute free food, and support others" (p. 38). Their homes function as hubs of intersectional activism and mutual aid. Beyond housing resistance, the collective also actively supports queer rights and protests against geopolitical issues. Also, their emphasis of care is extended beyond the household. "No one should be excluded from basic needs like shelter, food, and medicine. And if the state won't provide it, squatters will provide it themselves" (p. 332). This vision opposes the individualization and marketization of social life and repositions housing as part of a broader commons of care. By embedding solidarity into everyday spatial practice, Mokum Kraakt proposes a fundamentally different social logic in which housing is about taking care of each other in a system that has failed to do so.

4.2.4 **Spatial dimension** | Celebrating experimentation

Mokum Kraakt's (2023) spatial imaginary confronts the "smooth city", a perfected, commodified urban fabric shaped by speculation and exclusion. In the case of Amsterdam, it is argued that this smooth city accommodates tourists rather than citizens. As one post proclaims: "The city should belong to its residents, not be a theme park for mass tourism" (@MokumKraakt, 2021a). Instead of polished uniformity, they advocate for messy, experimental spaces that are inherently inclusive. Their critique is thus not solely aesthetic. They position spatial transformation as a matter of prefiguration: "As long as we still have the so-called 'frayed edges' of the city... the option of an autonomous existence still remains" (p. 231). These edges, whether vacant buildings, demolition sites, or forgotten lots, are reimagined as experimental commons where alternative urban life is prototyped. "Squatting can continue to fulfill its most important function: claiming a collective right to the city for everyone" (p. 320). At the heart of this lies a critique of spatial injustice and gentrification. For Mokum Kraakt, gentrification is not just an economic process but an erasure of identity and culture: "Gentrification is not only a housing crisis. It is a crisis of Amsterdam's soul" (p. 158). Notably, they acknowledge squatting's own potential contribution to gentrification. "The squatting movement must take responsibility for actively resisting gentrification. Every new squat action should consider this" (p. 355). Their spatial imaginary thus embraces urban imperfection while demanding accountability. It is about reclaiming not just buildings but the right to shape the city from below.

4.2.5 **Physical dimension** | Urban upcycling

Finally, Mokum Kraakt's (2023) physical housing imaginary challenges the assumption that urban change must be driven by demolition and/or new construction. Instead, they frame squatting as a form of urban upcycling. They use this term to refer to the transformation of vacant buildings into usable spaces for all types of usage. "We did not come here to vandalize, but to restore" (@MokumKraakt, 2021b). This reframing highlights that alternative futures can be built using what already exists, creatively, collectively, and against the grain of speculative development. Buildings are, therefore, not merely occupied but made visible as contested political space. The Hotel Mokum case, for example, illustrates how spatial reclamation becomes both a physical infrastructure and a symbolic medium: "In the month we stayed in the building, we proved how things can be done differently" (@MokumKraakt, 2022a). Protest banners, murals, and art exhibitions made the alternative tangible. Even post-eviction, memory lingers: "No longer does the building shout 'Take Mokum Back' to the unsuspecting passerby" (p. 27). Activists also highlight the sustainability of squatting by describing: "You could say that there is always a sustainability aspect involved when you put vacant space to use (p. 297). Some squatter-related 'intentional communities' are aiming to live ecologically sustainably. While not all practice these intentions, the alternative imaginary of the squatting collective does provide a vision for a more circular, sustainable, and co-created urban future.

4.2.6 From discourse to action

As the historical analysis demonstrated, squatting in Amsterdam was historically embedded in legal ambiguity, where spatial and political openings were somewhat negotiable. In contrast, the housing imaginary presented by Mokum Kraakt emerges in a way more restricted landscape, marked by the formal criminalization of squatting and the spatial erasure of urban fringes. However, in this context, squatting collectives still look for ways to enact and prefigure their alternative visions. To understand how the interaction between material and immaterial dimensions of the alternative forms a coherent assemblage, Figure 7 was developed. This figure shows how Mokum Kraakt constructs and circulates its imaginary through an assemblage of entangled elements: discourses, bodies, infrastructures, symbols, and mediums (Appadurai, 2015; Feola et al., 2023). This highlights how these elements interact to (temporarily) suspend dominant logics and perform alternative ways of living. These assemblages create real, yet fragile and often temporary, spaces where alternatives can be enacted. These are not marginal practices but mechanisms through which an imaginary becomes actually functional in practice.

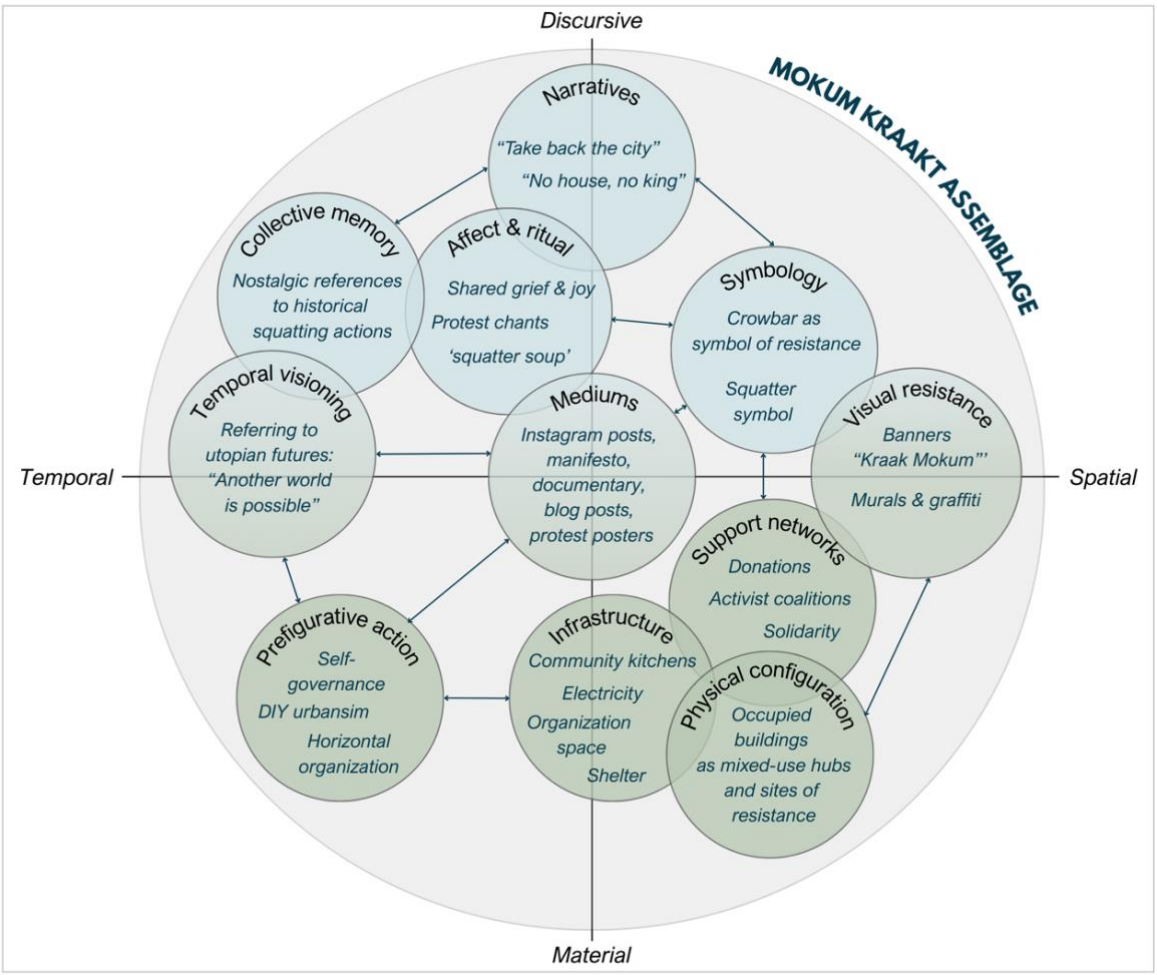


Figure 7: Visualization of the Mokum Kraakt Assemblage

Immaterial dimension

At the heart of Mokum Kraakt's imaginary lies the discursive narrative presented earlier. They articulate a refusal of the language of ownership, commodification, and exclusion and a presentation of how we could organize housing and urban life differently. This discourse is also reinforced through the symbolic use of the name 'Mokum', a term that is not only based on a nostalgic connection to Amsterdam's multicultural past but also points toward "the place we now create in resistance, in escape from the established order" (@MokumKraakt, 2021c). Mokum Kraakt's discourse is deeply performative. It is their online presence that makes their alternative imaginary visible, affective, and shareable. Also, their language is strikingly performative. Their imaginary is symbolically charged, with the iconic squatter's symbol and the previously mentioned crowbar as references in texts and visuals. These symbols translate narratives into recognizable visuals, helping to unify the movements and signal their presence.

Affect and ritual also constitute critical nodes. Their actions are not solely political but also emotional and embodied, generating a shared sense of purpose and creativity. The squatted spaces hosted communal meals, art showings, assemblies, workshops, and squatting assistance, all contributing to solidarity and collective momentum (@MokumKraakt, n.d.). This is extended by the role of collective memory, which ties current practices to a longer history of urban struggle. This is, for example, used to justify the impact of contemporary protest: "In the past, Dutch public housing significantly improved because entire neighborhoods went on rent strikes – even going as far as physically blocking evictions – and we are still reaping the benefits of their struggle today" (Mokum Kraakt, 2023, p. 281). Memory here is both backward- and forward-facing. It also legitimizes actions in pointing towards achieving a more just urban futures: "I believe another, better world is possible. A future without inequality, without colonialism, without exploitation" (Mokum Kraakt, 2023, p. 43).

Material dimension

However, discursive elements alone do not carry the movement. Squatting inherently has a spatial element since it is about reclaiming space and showcasing its use value. The imaginary is, therefore, assembled through spaces and infrastructures that have been reclaimed and utilized. The squatted Hotel Mokum was not only a shelter, but also a "political, social, and cultural center" (Mokum Kraakt, 2023, p. 23). Electricity was restored, community kitchens opened, and protest banners were unfurled from the windows. This also shows the importance of visual resistance: "No longer [after eviction] does the building shout 'Take Back Mokum' [protest banner] to the unsuspecting passerby" (Mokum Kraakt, 2023, p. 27). The material and infrastructural component is important since it not only enables survival but also showcases experimentation with other modes of living and organizing. Infrastructure, therefore, is not separate from discourse but rather allows the imaginary to materialize in physical space.

To not only articulate but also prove that another future is possible, the imaginary materializes through prefigurative practice. Rather than waiting for reform, the movement enacts the future it imagines: "What we aim for is to experiment with future alternatives within the present society, (…) we do not want to wait for a revolution" (Mokum Kraakt, 2023, p. 44). Squatted buildings become sites of intentional living and organizing, shaped by horizontal decision-making and mutual aid. These are not simply tactics; they are performative acts of world-building. Experimenting with alternatives in real life is mentioned a lot in their manifesto and social media posts, for example: "Squatting is about creating spaces that temporarily suspend the rules of the capitalist system, making room to enact alternative ideas and utopias" (Mokum Kraakt, 2023, p. 171). In sum, the alternative imaginary presented is not solely discourse. It emerges through an assemblage of entangled dimensions that together resist dominant logics and propose new urban futures that are shared, lived, and prefigurated. As the movement states, it is about "using protest to realize the city of the future" (@MokumKraakt, 2022b).

Hotel Mokum as an example of (contested) prefiguration

While the collective squatted multiple buildings between 2021-2024, the occupation of Hotel Marnix, renamed Hotel Mokum by the collective, presents a clear example of how protest can revolve into acts of prefiguration. The intention was to squat the vacant hotel and raise awareness for the housing crisis due to its visible location in the tourist heart of the city. As one squatter asked: "Do we really need another budget hotel in Amsterdam? Or do we need housing and creative space?" (Stöve, 2023). Despite their expectation to be evicted from the building in a few hours, it took weeks, which provided prospects for spatial prefiguration: "Then it suddenly hit us: we have this entire building at our disposal! And we have to do something with it" (Stöve, 2023). In the days that followed, the building was transformed into a space that embodied the collective's alternative housing vision. It turned into an urban commons, that organized all kind of uses in an autonomous way. Inherent to this were ideas of care and solidarity. This shift from occupation to prefiguration shows how a movement can move beyond resistance to become an act of prefiguration if the material infrastructure allows. Here, it was transformed into a lived alternative that embodied the collective's vision for the future of urban living. A few of the squatters moved in, others joined during communal dinners or other (cultural) events (Meijman, 2023). This physical manifestation of the imaginary disrupted dominant narratives of privatization and ownership, providing that collective self-management was not only imaginable but liveable: "In the month we stayed in the building, we proved how things can be done differently" (@MokumKraakt, 2022a).

Importantly, the spatial presence operated as a powerful symbolic medium. The protest banners hanging from its windows, the logo as a recognizable icon, and the collective's presence on social media circulated the imaginary beyond the building's walls. In this sense, the occupation functioned both as infrastructure and as media. Yet Hotel Mokum also reveals the limits of prefigurative politics in the 'smooth city' and its 'matrix of control' (Boer, 2023). The occupation lasted only six weeks before being evicted by the police at the request of the municipality that pointed out fire safety concerns. This left the squatters behind in disappointment and distrust (Meijman, 2023). This illustrates how fragile and conditional spatial occupation remains. While the collective's spatial practices enacted an alternative vision, they lacked institutional support and legal space. This shows how, without formal protections or policy footholds, the prefigurative visions of squatters are easily reversed. At the same time, the symbolic legacy of Hotel Mokum can be seen as a moment that sparked renewed public debate about the housing crisis and alternative urban futures. However, the fact that the collective behind it has currently mainly become inactive suggests a structural difficulty in maintaining momentum, even despite a large social media following. This exemplifies the precarity of radical alternatives without broader support, something that is reflected upon by an allied squatter in the next chapter. However, the imaginary lives on, as stated by one of the activists: "You can evict the building, but you can never evict our ideals" (Meijman, 2023).

4.2.7 Conclusion

This chapter has explored how the squatting collective Mokum Kraakt presented and enacted an alternative housing imaginary in a restrictive urban context. In answer to the subquestion, this chapter has shown how the collective presents and prefigures alternative housing imaginaries through both discursive and spatial practices that directly contest dominant logics. The collective articulates a radical vision of housing as a commons that is grounded in autonomy, collective care, and social value. An overview of the proposed alternatives is presented in Table 3. These imaginaries are prefigurative in a way that they enact an alternative vision in the here and now, by occupying spaces and performing collective practices. The case of Hotel Mokum showed how a short-lived occupation could temporarily suspend dominant logics and make alternative ways of living visible. Contrasting with the squatting movements of the 1970s and 1980s (as analyzed in chapter 4.1), Mokum Kraakt operates in a more constrained urban and legal landscape, where spatial occupation is criminalized and political space for negotiation is minimal. As a result, their prefigurative efforts remain largely marginal and structurally unsupported. Nevertheless, Mokum Kraakt managed to perform lived alternatives and circulated imaginaries that contested dominant narratives of housing and urban development. The next chapter builds on this by turning to the lived experiences of squatters and others involved in alternative housing, examining how tensions between autonomy and institutionalization are navigated in practice.

Table 3: Dimensions of housing, distinguishing dominant and alternative imaginaries.

Dimension	Definition	Dominant imaginary	Alternative imaginary
Financial	The economic structures, investment mechanisms, and state/market forces that shape housing and ownership models.	Housing as a commodity and investment asset, where market forces, financialization, and homeownership are prioritized through speculative market.	Housing as a commons grounded in use value, rejecting ownership and commodification. Squatting as a way to interrupt capital flows.
Political	The governance decisions, policy, and political ideologies that dictate housing regulation and the role of the state/market.	Housing as an individual responsibility, characterized by neoliberalism, deregulation, privatization, and reduced state intervention, favoring ownership.	Housing as a collective human right, realized through bottom-up governance and autonomous self-organization.
Social	The cultural values, social norms, and lived experiences that shape housing perceptions and realities.	Housing as centered around home-ownership and the nuclear family as economic agents and markers of success and stability.	Housing as a site of collective care, mutual aid, participation, and chosen kinship. Welcoming those excluded from conventional housing.
Spatial	The ways in which housing is physically distributed and structured with the broader urban (or regional) landscape.	Shift from state-driven spatial planning toward market-driven redevelopment, risking gentrification, displacement, and privatization of public space.	Allowing housing experimentation based on inclusion rather than gentrification. Embracing urban 'frayed edges' and imperfectionism.
Physical	The tangible aspects of housing, including design, materials, and typologies, shaped by economic, environmental, and social needs.	Standardized, high-density housing, prioritizing efficiency and increasingly sustainability, with limited adaptability and diversity.	Upcycling into mixed-use spaces for living, working, and organizing. DIY aesthetics, adaptability, and ecological consciousness.

4.3 Living the Imaginary

Interview insights on enacting and negotiating alternative housing imaginaries

Subquestion 3: How are alternative housing imaginaries lived, governed, and negotiated in practice, and what tensions arise between institutionalization and autonomy?

This chapter explores how different actors experience and negotiate alternative housing imaginaries. It shifts focus toward lived experiences to examine how and which imaginaries evolve, or lose momentum, when interacting with the institutional context. The chapter draws on semi-structured interviews with (former) squatters and residents of alternative housing initiatives. Additionally, some respondents had professional expertise that added to their insights. A complete overview of the interviewees and their relevance is included in Appendix 1. The five interviewees each reflect a different positionality within the housing debate. This diversity offers insights into how prefigurative practices operate both within and outside institutional structures and also includes some opinions of different generations. Through an inductive thematic analysis, four levels of enacting the imaginary are distinguished: living, governing, negotiating, and scaling the alternative. Together, they illuminate a central tension when assessing transformative potential: the friction between autonomy and institutionalization.

4.3.1 Living the alternative

Living the alternative refers to the everyday practices through which individuals and collectives attempt to materialize housing alternative housing imaginaries. All interviewees directly or indirectly expressed the ambition to prefigure alternative lifestyles. They reflect on an effort to build another future of urban living in the here and now rather than waiting for institutional change. “Even though there is a housing shortage, even if efficiency is important, there must be places where a completely different story can emerge” (Interview 1). “You don’t wait for politicians to act, you don’t wait for affordable housing to magically appear. Do it yourself. Take action. And in doing so, show what is possible” (Interview 4). What emerges across the interviews is a shared critique of the dominant housing system and a collective desire to reconfigure housing as something fundamentally social and relational. The interviewees' motivations resonated with the studied ‘Mokum Kraakt’ imaginary in the sense that a rejection of the current financialization of housing is rejected and replaced by alternatives that desire to reconfigure housing as care-based commons. “People take care of each other. That is not just nice, it is essential” (Interview 2). “Do we really need more single-family homes in the countryside? That’s what developers want to build, of course, (...), but there needs to be a proper housing policy again. Not just for a few income brackets. We used to have that, now we don’t, while there are so many possibilities, splitting homes, building upward, rethinking how we use space” (Interview 5).

Prefiguration becomes visible in how all interviewees emphasize that living an alternative life involves claiming the right to shape your own living environment. “Practice comes first, and what is really interesting is what it opens up. I have always found the concept of ‘engaged withdrawal’ compelling: stepping back from society but not shutting yourself off. Squatting is a form of withdrawal through engagement” (Interview 4). Rather than static units, houses are treated as environments that evolve with personal and collective needs: “Squatting, in that sense, functioned for me as a kind of crash course in architecture. You suddenly become responsible for a building, its preservation, its management, and above all: for reimagining how you want to live” (interview 1). “What I really like is that when you live in the building for so long and make it your own, it almost starts to feel like a person you talk to, it becomes that familiar and alive” (Interview 3). Others emphasize how housing collectives can also serve broader communities: “Our shared space is not just for us. We consciously made it an affordable neighborhood facility. A place that counters the commercialization of the inner city” (Interview 5). Across the interviews, housing is positively framed as a social infrastructure and platform for alternative realities. Yet, as these practices seek to stabilize or scale, they inevitably confront the boundaries of institutionalization, as shown in the next section.

4.3.2 Negotiating the alternative

While the interviewees share the ambition to enact alternatives, their pathways are diverse in how these alternatives are organized and sustained. A common thread is acknowledging that some degree of negotiation with institutions is unavoidable, even for those prioritizing autonomy. As one interviewee noted: “You simply cannot be completely autonomous or totally independent. Having nothing to do with the law or governance, that is just not possible” (Interview 4). However, the form and depth of institutional engagement vary significantly. Three interviewees described living in housing arrangements that originated from squatting and neighborhood resistance and were then formalized through negotiation with the municipality and housing associations. These arrangements offer protection and continuity and illustrate how grassroots imaginaries can evolve into embedded living typologies: “The idea of squatting a building and having it legalized as a living-working arrangement in itself became a new imaginary, a way in which squatting evolved and developed further” (Interview 1). One of the mentioned risks of this process of institutionalization is the dilution of ideas. As one interviewee remarked: “Sometimes we do not agree with the housing association, but unfortunately, we then often have to bend a little” (Interview 2). Others pointed to increasing bureaucratization and professionalization: “Things have become more bureaucratic, which can feel quite alienating. Nowadays, people refer to statutes, whereas in the past, we just used common sense. I find it fascinating how people can lose sight of their own ideals, they become alienated from them without even realizing it" (Interview 3).

Despite these tensions, the interviewees from institutionalized initiatives all emphasized their pride in what has been built and sustained. “Things are actually going really well with this building and with the collective” (Interview 3). The interviewees reflect on institutionalization to be both constraining and enabling. On the one hand, they experience moments of tension between their vision and the regulations of housing associations: “Sometimes we do not agree with the housing association, but unfortunately, we then often have to bend a little” (Interview 2). Interviewees stressed the importance of conversation to ensure good cooperation between the parties: “We often had to explain everything again [to the housing association]. I did that a lot. We’d invite them here, show them around, tell them our story so they understand: this is resident self-management”. The interviewees were mostly positive about their institutionalized structure, seeing it as more enabling than restraining. This includes, for example, giving back tasks to the housing association when unable to take them themselves, like major maintenance: “After the building was squatted in 1981, an agreement was reached between the squatters, the municipality, and the housing association. Since then, we have rented the shell of the building, and we are free to manage and organize the interior as we wish” (Interview 3) or asking for assistance and advice when needed: “Thankfully, because housing management is a true profession. We can always fall back on their expertise if needed” (Interview 5).

In contrast to these institutionalized forms of alternative living, contemporary squatting operates in a far more hostile environment, where criminalization and institutional restrictions limit opportunities for engagement. Still, squatting can add value: “Squatting and other forms of direct action create space for people to form new social bonds, and in doing so, enable things that top-down urban planning could never achieve” (Interview 4). However, interviewees also acknowledge struggles, including a lack of vacant buildings, quick evictions, and bad media publicity. They nostalgically refer to the past as a political climate with more transformative potential: “I mean, squatting was supported by the law for a long time. It was only criminalized in 2010. Until then, it wasn’t exactly legal, of course, but there was a lot of space for it in the law. And that definitely contributed to its success in Amsterdam” (Interview 4). Another interviewee reflected on this shift over time: “I wonder if I would be able to pull this off now. I’m not sure if it was easier in the 1980s. I do know that others are trying to set up similar structures today, and I suspect that the agreements we managed to secure were more favorable than what people can achieve nowadays” (Interview 2). Together, these reflections reveal the complexity of negotiating alternatives. While institutions can help stabilize and scale grassroots imaginaries, they also risk diluting their radical edge. Nevertheless, the all interviewees stressed the importance of prefiguration outside the formal system, facilitating things that top-down planning could not achieve. The next section explores the opportunities and tensions reflected upon when governing the alternative.

4.3.3 Governing the alternative

While prefiguration begins with reclaiming space, whether through formal or informal channels, its continuation depends on its ability to govern collectively. Across the interviews, the transition from experimental to sustained living revealed that even autonomy requires active organization. The interviews reveal that such practices not only rely on shared values but also on sustained efforts to organize everyday tasks, especially in the absence of external support structures. Barriers such as time constraints or volunteer burnout challenge the durability of alternatives. “We are basically always understaffed in working groups. It would be nice if more neighbors got involved, but you cannot force people” (Interview 2). Also, for squatters, their circumstances and ideals make it difficult. “It is quite hard for squatters to sustain. It takes a lot from you, especially because there is often an expectation that if you live somewhere for free, you should give back by helping others or organizing things” (Interview 4). Beyond formal agreements and task distribution, internal governance is also shaped by generational shifts. One interviewee described how their collective formed a “committee on aging” to address the physical, social, and organizational needs of an aging population: “We divided it into subgroups, one looks at care access, another on structural adaptations, like installing an intercom, and one focuses on strengthening the social fabric by cooking together monthly” (Interview 3). This proactive approach illustrates that internal governance is not static but evolves with the lifecycle of the community.

Interviewees also stress the importance of bringing in a younger generation, even though this can lead to shifting priorities: “The younger residents now do things in completely different ways – they communicate differently, bring new ideas, and take on different projects” (Interview 5). While new leadership emerges, time scarcity is regarded the main constrain: “The younger generation is now taking over. That’s great, of course. But it’s also a different time. People in their thirties are just very busy, work, kids, everything. Time is a real constraint” (Interview 5). This illustrates the uneven nature of the alternative. On the one hand, all interviewees describe it as empowering. “It makes you feel responsible for your own environment” (Interview 2). On the other hand, the uneven nature of involvement and expectations is a general challenge. “What I notice is that people who do a lot think others should do more. I always find that a bit nonsensical, because not everyone wants that, or is able to” (Interview 3). One interviewee specifically points to the dominant housing system as a root cause of the lack of time and resources to participate in grassroots initiatives: “The housing crisis is, to me, the social tragedy of our time. When people are consumed by the struggle to afford a place to live, there is no space left for collective initiative. (...) Squatting creates rare enclaves where that pressure eases, even if only on a small scale” (Interview 4). In sum, governing the alternative is a balancing act between autonomy and institutionalization and continuity and change. It is shaped not only by values but also by the capacities of the people who sustain it.

4.3.4 Scaling the alternative

Scaling the alternative involves engaging with the material and immaterial constraints that determine whether alternatives can endure and influence the mainstream. Interviewees reflect on both the possibilities and limitations of broader transformations, whether operating inside the system or beyond it. In the interviews with (former) squatters, it is acknowledged that the space for squatting has narrowed. As one notes: "Beyond our historical success, you still have some recent examples where squatting actually made an impact. But of course, it’s becoming increasingly difficult” (Interview 3). The legal repression makes it harder for squatting and neighborhood action to serve as a stepping-stone toward institutional recognition, as it once could. “The results go really far. The Dutch drug tolerance policy also originated from the squatter movement. Shelters for victims of domestic violence as well. There are all sorts of social initiatives that have originated that you cannot plan. And they emerge when people have space” (Interview 4). This underlines the dual identity of urban resistance, both as a contested, marginal practice and as a catalyst for changes in urban governance. The enduring presence of autonomous squatting practices signals the ongoing need for structural alternatives. “Squatting is definitely still happening, maybe even more than a year ago. Maybe it is less visible, but still active” (Interview 4). “Despite intensified repression and societal pressure, they still manage to pull it off. That, to me, is deeply inspiring” (Interview 1).

However, without legal space or state tolerance, radical alternatives are more likely to remain temporary or be (violently) shut down. One of the interviewees calls this the 'matrix of control' of the smooth city: "When you try to do something yourself, it is often made impossible, immediately blocked, or even criminalized. The city presents itself as perfected but offers no entry points for people to actively shape it" (Interview 1). However, still, and maybe even more, symbolic ruptures and storytelling matter: "With Mokum Kraakt, I hoped we established a new standard. But it faded. Without communication and public goodwill, squatting remains misunderstood" (Interview 4). As a reason, the lack of a compelling story is mentioned. "I do not believe squatting can solve the housing shortage, so you should not claim that. I think it's much better to just be honest. (...) In my view, they would have been better off saying: We are *Amsterdammers* and we are here creating to claim and create a piece of city" (Interview 1). "I think the real battle we have lost, in terms of public perception, is the idea that the solution to the housing crisis is simply building more homes" (Interview 4). This suggests that storytelling and affective resonance become part of its transformative potential beyond merely formal negotiation or institutionalization. Two interviewees described land squats becoming eco-villages, and squatted buildings winning court cases as contemporary successes. These practices point to a different kind of scaling: not necessarily replication or institutional uptake but through situated acts of resistance that offer lived critiques of dominant housing regimes.

Interviews also reveal a divide between outsider strategies (involving direct action) and insider strategies (formalized, like housing cooperatives). Interviews express both hope in the co-op model but also skepticism: "I worry that co-ops today are so regulated that they can't be truly alternative. You can't just put eight caravans onto a field" (Interview 1). Institutionalization may offer durability, but risks coming at the cost of autonomy and radical intent. This introduces broader questions about what forms of alternative housing are considered legitimate and by whom. Several interviewees reflect on the limitations of municipally celebrated initiatives like the *broedplaatsenbeleid* (cultural incubator policy). Multiple presidents argued that these policies lack long-term security and fail to support artists or collectives in structurally meaningful ways: "Broedplaatsen are usually for buildings that don't have a use for a while, and then you can put artists there for five years, maybe ten. But it's still temporary. That's what's so bad about it" (Interview 3). "That [*Broedplaatsenbeleid*] is seen as a kind of solution, like, okay, we'll just set up a few creative hubs on the far edge of the city. For me, that is not a fundamental answer" (Interview 1). In sum, the potential to scale housing alternatives is not just a question of institutionalization but also storytelling and safeguarding core values. In this sense, scaling means navigating, and sometimes resisting, the systems that alternatives seek to transform. The next chapter further unpacks how these dynamics unfold at the policy level.

4.3.5 Conclusion

This chapter has shown that alternative housing imaginaries, whether still actively squatting or only have a history related to it, are not only envisioned, but also actively lived, negotiated, governed, and, potentially, scaled. Through interviews with actors operating both inside and outside institutional frameworks, a spectrum of prefigurative practices emerges, from autonomous squatting to formalized self-management. While institutionalization offers continuity through protection and advice, it also introduces friction through bureaucracy and the risk of dilution. Conversely, autonomous practices preserve radical intent but remain fragile in the face of legal and spatial repression. Rather than fitting neatly into a single transition pathway, these imaginaries diverge onto multiple routes, shaped by institutional openings. In answering the subquestion, this chapter shows that people can experience and negotiate housing ideas through different strategies. Each strategy presents distinct challenges and opportunities. The interviews reveal that the potential for change relies not just on continuity or ability to scale, but also on the ability to manage the tensions between autonomy and institutionalization. In other words, it's about resisting the system while also working within it. Although the following discussion will consider what these insights mean for the literature on transition pathways, the next chapter will first focus on the system itself. This chapter will examine whether policy conditions allow or limit alternatives to gain traction.

4.4 (Un)locking the imaginary

A critical discourse analysis of Amsterdam's policy landscape using the MLP

Subquestion 4: Does Amsterdam's policy landscape provide a window of opportunity for alternative housing imaginaries to transform dominant regime logics?

Where the previous chapters examined bottom-up pressures for housing transformation, this chapter shifts focus to the regime itself. The Dutch housing system shows signs of internal strain as the consequences of decades of liberalization and market-driven development become increasingly evident (Boelhouwer, 2019; van Gent, 2013). These pressures led to re-politicizing housing at the Dutch national level, even reinstating a minister for housing in 2022 (Rijksoverheid, 2022). Furthermore, a growing number of scholars, such as Flynn & Montalbano (2024), suggest that this may be prompting a gradual shift in housing governance towards post-neoliberalism, where housing is increasingly recognized as a public good and in need of state control. Yet, this shift is fragmented and shaped by political contestation and path-dependency. At the time of writing, a reintroduction of rent increases in the regulated sector is on the Dutch political table (Righton, 2025). While the outcomes of this discussion are still unclear, this dissonance between discursive shifts and policy directly underscores the contested and uneven nature of any (post-neoliberal) transition (Flynn & Montalbano, 2024).

Amsterdam provides an interesting case to examine potential windows of opportunity for alternative housing imaginaries. The city is often presented as a progressive policy actor known for its urban experimentation and strong planning tradition (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2021). While national housing policy sets structural parameters and the institutional backdrop, strategic choices are made at the municipal level. The analysis by Flynn & Montalbano (2024) suggests an institutional awareness of the need for alternative solutions to the city's housing problems. However, it remains unclear whether such initiatives represent a window of opportunity for a substantive transformation of the regime. Using a critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995) guided by the Multi-Level Perspective (Geels, 2002; Törnberg, 2021), this section illustrates how housing imaginaries are framed in Amsterdam's policy context and whether it discursively signals potential for institutional transformation. The analysis considers a range of strategic and programmatic documents, with attention to their relative positions within Amsterdam's policy hierarchy (see Appendix 3).

4.4.1 **Landscape pressures** | Framing the issue

Amsterdam's main strategic document, the *Omgevingsvisie 2050* (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2021), describes the city as being challenged by intersecting external pressures: "Amsterdam is experiencing a turbulent time. Years of rapid growth have been broken by a pandemic, there is the ongoing train of internationalization, technological development, and sharpened social divisions, plus the necessary transition due to climate change" (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2021, p. 20). These are framed as long-term disruptions that redefine the city's trajectory. Housing is identified across the policy documents as one of the main sites where these pressures converge. The main housing policy, the *Woonagenda 2025* (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2017), acknowledges challenges like housing scarcity, rising prices, and segregation. It attributes these problems to Amsterdam's success and desirability, rather than to political or policy decisions: "The increasing attractiveness of Amsterdam and especially the recovering economy have large effects on the city" (p. 5). Additionally, the *Woningbouwplan 2022-2028* (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2022a) directly mentions current economic conditions as significant barriers to supply.

The city positions itself as vulnerable to global and national economic landscape pressures. Therefore, the core policy documents frame the housing problem because of structural mismatch, which should be solved by market-led supply rather than framing it as a governance issue. In this way, the 'success' of Amsterdam is framed to be both a success and a strain: "Cities like Amsterdam are popular. The pressure translates into long waiting times for social housing, a large shortage of mid-priced housing, and sharply increased prices in the private sector" (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2021, p. 166). Despite signaling urgency and mentioning 'turbulent' times, the discourse avoids labeling housing as a crisis, unlike climate change or the pandemic. Moreover, the absence of public discontent in the documents reveals a blind spot since public unrest is often seen to be a key destabilizing factor in MLP terms.

While the housing problems are not explicitly labeled a crisis, the interconnectedness of all structural drivers identified and the persistent acknowledgment of the problems that arise from this suggest that the regime is operating under significant landscape pressures. These pressures, even when downplayed or depoliticized in policy language, point to potential cracks in the system that could open space for alternative imaginaries and governance models to gain traction. These cracks are visible only at the policy fringes in specific programmatic documents. *Expeditie Vrije Ruimte* (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2020) (a policy programmatic for 'free zones'), for example, explicitly mentions a "city in transformation", where spatial scarcity and financial pressures threaten urban vitality. While not part of the dominant policy canon, such language signals discursive openings and the potential for alternative approaches to housing to gain traction, if institutional conditions allow.

4.4.2 **Socio-political regime** | Dominant logics & instruments

Amsterdam's housing regime reflects a hybrid configuration of persistent market logics with selective post-neoliberal shifts. The *Omgevingsvisie 2050* (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2021) exemplifies this duality. It frames growth as an "opportunity for achieving inclusivity, affordability, and sustainability" (p. 18), while simultaneously promoting "spatial development as a revenue model" (p. 42). Although it acknowledges that the city must "protect itself against the great power of capital and ensure that homes remain affordable for new and long-term residents" (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2021, p. 161), its instruments remain largely market-compatible, prioritizing densification, growth, value creation, and productivity. Operational housing documents reinforce this tension. They propose more active state steering, noting that "the government can position itself as an intermediary between capital and real estate development" (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2022a, p. 47), but remain grounded in productionist logic. Regulatory tools such as the 40/40/20 rule (respective social housing, middle rent, and private sector percentages) and rent caps seem to aim at fine-tuning market outcomes, rather than restructuring the regime dynamics. The framing of shortages as a supply issue, "The housing shortage is solved by building houses" (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2017, p. 35), sustains this managerial approach.

Some legal instruments reflect a post-neoliberal shift. The *Huisvestigingsverordening* (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2025) introduces buy-to-let bans, vacancy regulations, and restrictions on tourist rentals, amongst other regulations. This shifts housing from an investment good to more of a public good. Still, these can be seen as procedural corrections, not structural alternatives. In contrast, the *Amsterdamse Aanpak Volkshuisvesting* (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2023a) marks a clearer ideological break, including the language of *volkshuisvesting* (public housing) and framing housing as a right grounded in social needs: "Whoever needs a home the most, gets it first" (p. 10). The document signals a redistributive and care-based approach, emphasizing area-based coordination and an active municipal role in regulating and enforcing housing justice. In doing so, it can be argued that this document is an example of ideological reframing. Programmatic documents such as *Expeditie Vrije Ruimte* (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2020) and *Bouw Zelf Samen* (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2022b) further push the discursive shift. The former calls to "pull free space out of the neoliberal capitalist market" (p. 85), while the latter celebrates self-build as a response to uniformity and social fragmentation. Yet, these measures remain peripheral in strategic documents and are rather framed as pilots or experiments.

The *Actieplan Wooncoöperatie* (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2019a) is one of the clearest examples indicating municipal repositioning. It promotes collective ownership and governance by providing land to co-ops through dedicated tenders, legal and organizational support, and supportive financing mechanisms. As stated, "the municipality facilitates but expects professional initiative takers" (p. 8). So, while the municipality acts as a supportive partner, it also gives responsibility to residents, expecting them to navigate legal and institutional frameworks. Self-organization is celebrated, but only when formalized and professionalized. An indicator of this boundary is the continued criminalization and active suppression of squatting (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2019b). This illustrates that you can enact alternatives, but only if you adjust to legal frameworks and fill out the right forms. On the other hand, the policy documents also celebrate stronger state roles and 'collective citybuilding', illustrating a governance mode where the state seeks new legitimacy through participatory frames. However, the municipality retains control over processes and outcomes. This reflects broader uncertainties within post-neoliberal governance: Will power shift more to the state, more toward communities, or hybrid?

4.4.3 **Niche imaginaries** | Positioning the alternatives

Beyond discursive framing, it is also about the institutional support and structural limitations that affect niche alternatives. The *Omgevingsvisie 2050* (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2021) points to the city's history to support the fight for alternatives, embracing its "liberal-mindedness, activism, and compassion" (p. 19). The document explicitly supports free spaces and incubators, including housing cooperations and collective self-build, commons-based models like community wealth and community land trusts, and elderly homes as communal care networks: "The strength of these forms of spatial use is that the initiative lies with citizens, in the shelter of market forces and government policy" (p. 163). The document acknowledges that building more houses alone will not solve the affordability crisis and financialization of the housing market. Alternatives are framed as embedded in the city's broader narrative on social return and inclusive transition, but also as experimental and instrumental.

The operational housing documents reflect more constrained narratives. The *Woonagenda 2025* (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2017) and *Woningbouwplan 2022-2028* (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2022a) acknowledge niche practices, including co-ops and self-build, yet often in an instrumental way. The *Woonagenda* presents self-build options as successful yet marginal. Co-ops, moreover, are formally recognized under Article 18 of the Dutch Housing Act (Rijksoverheid, n.d.). However, the national legal space remains limited and conditional, and as noted by Cooplink (2024), significant legal and institutional barriers limit practical implementation. In Amsterdam, co-ops are supported by a municipal action team. While this signals an early step towards cooperative governance, the discourse remains production oriented. They are simply discussed as a response to shortages or demographic targeting. The *Woningbouwplan* reflects slightly more operational integration of alternatives, offering municipal loans to co-ops and encouraging shared spaces, modular housing, and flexhousing. Also here, these models are framed as responses to financial and spatial constrains, not as visions for system transformation: "Modular construction is cheaper, more sustainable (CO2, waste), and safer" (p. 50); "There is a trend toward shared spaces, particularly for students, youth, and elderly" (p. 36).

More ambitious discursive shifts appear in programmatic policies. The *Broedplaatsenbeleid* (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2023c), for example, facilitates non-commodified usage of space. However, this comes with conditions, facilitating housing alternatives only when embedded within cultural functions: "We aim at supporting at least four new groups that want to create a property that is both a cultural incubator and a housing cooperation" (p. 53). *Expeditie Vrije Ruimte* (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2020) en *Bouw Zelf Samen* (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2022b) go further, promoting de-commodification and participatory planning. EVR envisions a "mixed-use community that combines inclusivity, circularity, and alternative governance" (p. 85), while BZS calls to "remove it [housing] from the financial sphere and center the lived reality of residents" (p. 21). Yet these policy programs are rarely included in the core strategies, and if they are, they are framed as pilots or testbeds rather than integrated strategies. The most embedded niche is the housing cooperation. The *Actieplan Wooncoöperatie* (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2019a) recognizes co-ops as a 'transformative niche' and sets a target of 10% of the housing stock by 2040 (p. 14). It highlights values such as affordability, empowerment, and democratic governance, but also notes barriers around land, financing, and legal complexity.

When assessing the potential for niches to infiltrate the regime, co-ops are the most embedded niche, both discursively and materially supported. However, they are also framed as complementary, not substitutive to the dominant regime. Notably absent is any integration of housing alternatives in the city's innovation strategy. The *Strategie Innovatiedistricten* (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2023b) focuses exclusively on technological development, including actors such as knowledge institutions and startups. This reveals a narrow conceptualization of innovation that fails to engage with housing-related and community-driven experimentation. Even the *Amsterdamse Aanpak Volkshuisvesting* (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2023a), which actively advocates for a rights-based discourse, largely ignores alternative housing models. This reveals a striking disconnect. While post-neoliberal narratives are increasingly visible in policy language, actual alternatives remain marginal in institutional logic. As such, their transformative potential is not only limited by material barriers such as land or finance but also by the dominant frameworks that define what counts as 'desirable' urban development.

4.4.4 Conclusion

This chapter analyzed how Amsterdam's housing policy landscape engages with systemic change through the lens of the Multi-Level Perspective (Geels, 2002). Tracing discourse across all levels assesses the transformative potential for alternatives to change dominant institutional structures.

- At the landscape level, multiple pressures are acknowledged across strategic documents like the *Omgevingsvisie 2050* (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2021). Frequently mentioned pressures are climate change and economic disruptions. On a social level, demographic shifts and social fragmentation are mentioned. However, concerning housing, challenges are mainly framed as external constraints rather than integral governance outcomes. This framing depoliticizes the housing problem and shifts responsibility away from systemic reform.
- At the regime level, post-neoliberal narrative is gaining traction. Policy documents increasingly include rights-based discourse and participatory rhetoric. This is mainly true for dedicated documents, including the *Amsterdamse Aanpak Volkshuisvesting* (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2023a), and for procedural measures like those included in the *Huisvestigingsverordening* (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2025). At the same time, solutions remain anchored in managerial and productionist logics to simply 'build more'. This narrative prevails in core documents like the *Woningbouwplan 2022-2028* (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2022a). While housing alternatives and experimentation are mentioned in most policy documents, these seem to function as complementary solutions rather than openings for transformation. This introduces the rigidity of the dominant regime, co-opting alternatives as a tool to reinforce stability.
- At the niche level, alternative housing imaginaries, including commons-based models and cooperative structures, are symbolically embraced. As shown in the previous analysis, niches are often conditionally supported or operationalized through experimental and programmatic channels. Even promising cases like co-ops, as celebrated in the *Actieplan Wooncoöperatie* (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2019a), are positioned within existing logics and have to comply with existing regulations, which limit their capacity to serve as transformative niches.

Taken together, the analysis shows a policy framework that increasingly uses the language of housing justice and change, but mainly within established institutional limits. In answer to the subquestion, this chapter demonstrates that Amsterdam's policy landscape offers only limited and conditional chances for alternative housing ideas to shift dominant beliefs. While niche ideas like co-ops are gaining support, their potential for change is still held back by a system that picks and chooses alternatives without questioning its basic principles. The non-commercial and collective values of squatting movements are somewhat reflected in policies that support co-ops. However, these are often marginalized or treated as experiments. The informal and oppositional nature of squatting itself is still left out of the policy discussion. This shows that although some of its ideas are absorbed, the dominant system still controls what is seen as valid housing innovation. In this context, housing is ultimately a matter of power and governance and is shaped by a rigid system that continues despite pressures for change. The next chapter discusses what these findings mean for the broader question of how squatting movements aim to challenge and change dominant governance systems.

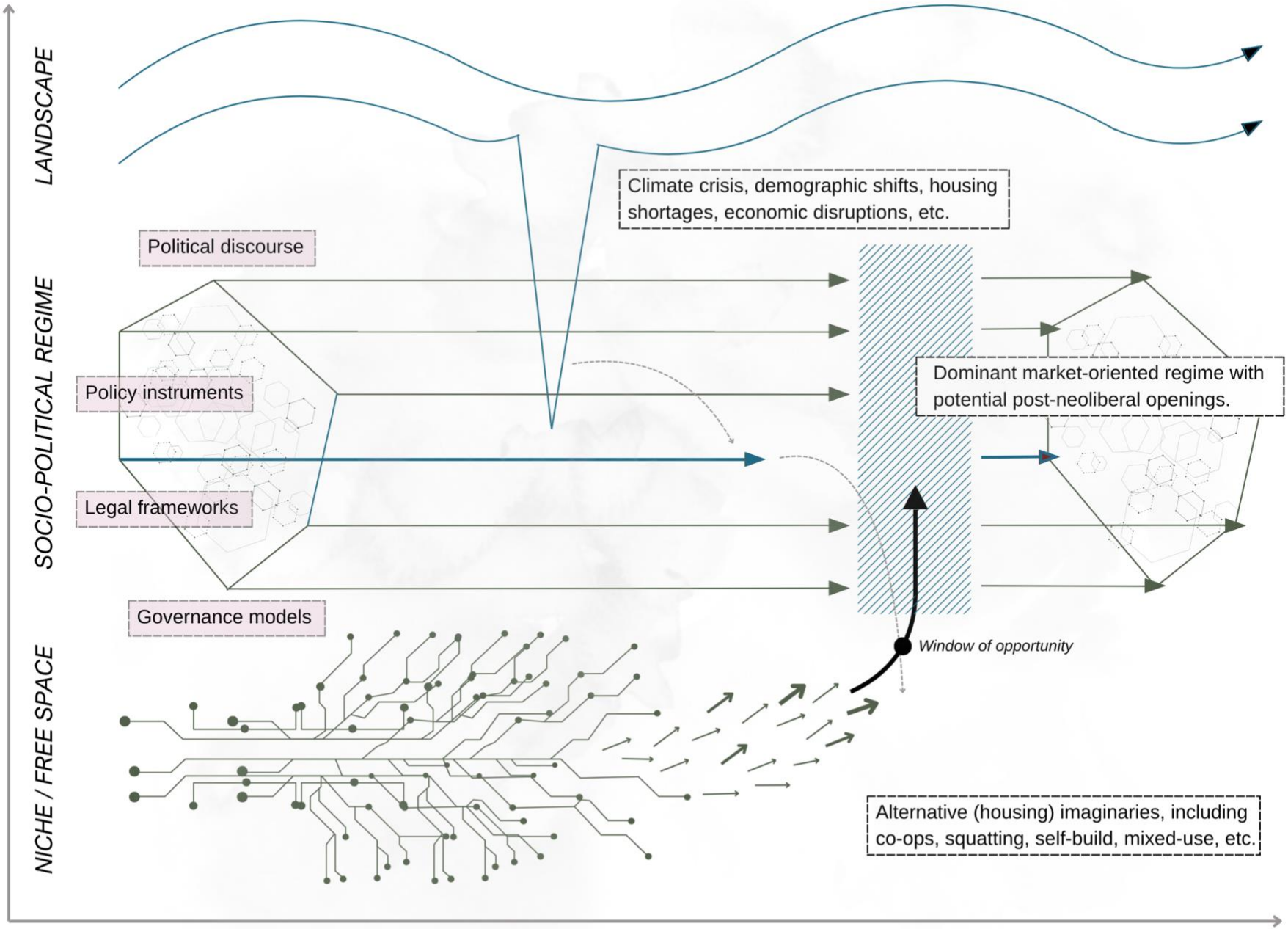


Figure 8: Schematic illustration of the policy analysis according to the Multi Level Perspective (Geels, 2002).

5 Discussion

To wrap up and synthesize the results presented in this research, this discussion reflects on the broader meanings and implications of the findings. This chapter brings together the four strands of research to assess what they reveal about alternative housing imaginaries of squatting movements and their transformative potential. Rather than treating the answer to each subquestion in isolation, the focus of the discussion lies on identifying insights that cut across the different levels of analysis. The discussion begins by presenting this synthesis of findings before turning to the theoretical implications the findings have for academic literature. Then, the discussion critically reflects on the strengths and limitations of this study and its relevance for various knowledge users. Finally, the chapter offers recommendations for policy and design to support alternative visions and concludes with suggestions for future research.

5.1 Synthesis of findings

By exploring the alternative housing imaginaries of historical and recent squatting movements, this research studied both their content and lived experiences to assess transformative potential. Across this research, alternative imaginaries emerged not as merely abstract visions. Instead, the findings show that it operates through a layered assemblage of material and immaterial factors that engage with and reject the dominant housing regime. Viewed together, the findings point to a complex coexistence between imaginaries and institutions. The space between grassroots practices and institutional structures is marked by friction, negotiation, and selective absorption. A key insight that cuts across the empirical results is the limited institutional permeability through which alternatives can influence the dominant regime. While moments of porosity have historically enabled squatters to shape policy and urban form, today's regime offers fewer and more conditional points of access. For instance, while legalized alternatives once emerged through negotiations in the 1970s and 1980s, recent examples faced rapid eviction despite public support. This reveals a shift in how imaginaries are managed. They are increasingly restricted and only tolerated when depoliticized or professionalized. At the same time, the narrowing opportunities for institutional engagement have not ended the production of squatting as a site of alternative imaginaries but rather led to them adjusting their form and (spatial) visibility.

Due to a more restrictive climate, squatting re-emerged less as a mass movement and more as a marginal yet prefigurative practice. Through performative tactics involving occupation and (social) media strategies, contemporary collectives perform the possibility of other housing futures, even when denied physical space. Mokum Kraakt's Instagram presence, for example, functioned as a performative extension of the spatial occupation. However, it also highlighted the challenge of creating public support. This introduces the tension between autonomy and engagement. Actors working within squatted or legalized self-managed spaces navigate an ongoing negotiation between internal ideals and external demands. The findings show that many imaginaries do not aim for absolute system replacement but seek to use the cracks in the dominant order, finding an alternative for themselves. So, these alternatives can be individualistic and temporary, however, they can expand the field of what is seen as politically and spatially possible, even when they do not endure. Visibility matters. Alternatives gain traction not just through formal recognition but by mobilizing affect into public opinion or tactically using historical narratives. Imaginaries are more likely to survive when they are recognized as meaningful and legitimate by others, whether institutions or the public. It can be concluded that a compelling story, one that resonates beyond the collective itself, is crucial beyond legal status or institutional support. Yet this process of translation often comes at a cost, with the radical edge of imaginaries risking being diluted.

To compare these insights, case studies from other cities affirm key dynamics found in this research. Di Feliciantonio (2017) describes the re-emergence of squatting in Rome amidst increased inequalities and austerity measures. In this case, the place was turned into an 'urban commons' and not evicted due to its social relevance and mobilized community support, emphasizing the importance of coalition building and affect in prefiguring an alternative. This confirms that imaginaries can endure outside institutional support. Similarly, Milligan (2023) analyzes a 2015 squat in London that, like Hotel Mokum, was quickly evicted but exposed symbolic cracks in the system by prefiguring an alternative that influenced public opinion for a long time. The author argues that effective and emotional bonds created endure beyond the physical occupation, acting as a catalyst for renewed action within housing justice

movements. A point of divergence between this study and other case studies centers around the role of coalition-building. Beyond Di Feliciantonio (2017), Martínez López's (2019) case of Madrid and the study of Debelle et al. (2018) on Barcelona emphasize tactical alliances and cross-movement coalitions as central to achieving transformative potential when regime openness remains limited. While the Amsterdam context touched upon support networks, the study focused more on navigating institutional frameworks instead. Since one of the key results is the fact that transformative potential can also occur beyond institutional transition pathways, these additional insights highlight the need to study the transformative potential of squatting in relation to broader coalition-building.

Ultimately, combining the empirical insights from Amsterdam with additional literature, evidence suggests that transformation is not a linear process but a continuous negotiation between what is imagined and what is allowed. Enacting alternatives, therefore, is a method of showing that other ways of living are not only imaginable but also possible. This demonstrates that the power of imaginaries lies not just in their dominance but in their persistence. Additionally, beyond the strengths of the alternative, systemic change depends on the porosity of institutions. Finally, even when their material presence disappears, as with Hotel Mokum, the imaginary can continue to circulate through public discourse and activist action. Particularly when institutional openings are limited, whether imaginaries take root or fade seems to depend on the ability to connect (symbolic) actions with affective resonance and forming strategic alliances.

5.2 Theoretical contributions

This section reflects on how the findings of this thesis engage with and contribute to the theoretical framework introduced in Chapter 2. The research builds on the introduced concepts, not only testing these theories but also critically engaging with them. The study supports several key theoretical assumptions by analyzing squatting as a grassroots practice for alternative ideas. These include the performative aspect of imaginaries and the rigidity of socio-political systems. However, it also questions some frameworks. Regarding Törnberg's (2021) transition pathways, the research results show that there can also be transformation pathways outside of formal structures. Additionally, the most important contribution is introducing the idea of porosity as a crucial factor for socio-political change, offering a new perspective on Geels' (2022) Multi-Level Perspective. The following sections explore six interconnected theoretical implications arising from this study.

Imaginaries as assemblages: performative but structurally fragile

The research shows the performative power of imaginaries. This supports Castoriadis' (1987) notion of the instituting society. This concept refers to the idea that society is continuously (re)created through collective imaginaries that give direction to social life. The research also confirms Davoudi & Machen's (2022) standpoint that imaginaries materialize through both discourse and (spatial) practice. However, it also reveals the structural weakness of imaginaries when they lack material support. Despite a strong discursive presence, Mokum Kraakt's momentum diminished without the required spatial and legal infrastructures. This underscores that imaginaries must be seen not only as a (counter) narrative but as assemblages. This concept refers to the dynamic configurations of discourse, space, practices, and infrastructure that produce and sustain the alternative (Appadurai, 2015; Feola et al., 2023). When one or more of these components of the assemblage are removed or weakened, as the spatial aspect in the case of Hotel Mokum's eviction, the imaginary loses not just its visibility but also its internal dynamics. While most literature focuses on imaginaries as meaning-making forces, this research stresses the whole assemblage, including the material conditions. While it shows that systemic transformation requires infrastructure, discursive alternatives can still hold transformative potential outside the system, as elaborated on in the next section.

Transformation pathways beyond the system

While the research aligns with Törnberg's (2021) theory that prefiguration can have transformative potential across transition pathways, ranging from reproduction to actual regime substitution. However, while Törnberg (2021) emphasizes the importance of institutional openings for these trajectories to unfold, this thesis suggests that not all transformation is institutional. Nor is it always oriented toward systemic integration. Drawing on the empirical insights, the findings show that spatial and discursive interventions, even when politically marginalized or physically evicted, can still alter public opinion and inspire future initiatives. These forms of non-institutional transformation challenge dominant housing regimes without necessarily seeking inclusion. In this way, the thesis proposes that prefigurative action can also lead to what Graeber (2004) refers to as 'engaged withdrawal', the act of stepping outside dominant systems while simultaneously engaging in the creation of alternatives. Rather than an apolitical escape, this form of withdrawal remains politically engaged by demonstrating that other worlds are possible, even if they operate outside formal systems. This extends Törnberg's typology by showing that change can also come from outside, meaning not just through system reform but through alternative world-building beyond the formal system.

Reframing prefiguration as a strategic continuum

Rather than treating prefiguration as a static or utopian alternative, this thesis conceptualizes it as a strategic continuum that moves between resistance, negotiation, and transformation. While Monticelli (2024) and Schiller-Merkens (2022) highlight the potential of prefiguration to enact future visions in the present, the findings of the research highlight the importance of political openings and institutional boundaries. Prefiguration in this study also involves negotiation with legal structures. While not part of the initial theoretical framework, this insight aligns with Miraftab's (2009) concept of insurgent planning, which refers to a hybrid practice combining oppositional and collaborative tactics to change the system from below. Here, it goes further by showing how prefiguration adapts over time as movements scale, decline, or change. The key insight is that prefiguration is not fixed but rather responsive and mediated by both actor intent and institutional context. This confirms Schiller-Merkens' (2022) multi-political approach to prefiguration, which understands prefigurative politics as engaging not only in opposition practices but also in coalition-building and institutional negotiation. The case presented here shows evidence of all three forms of organizing: squatters confront the state, build coalitions with other movements, and seek institutional footholds through institutional and legal negotiations. This adds to Schiller-Merkens' (2022) approach that transformation can emerge from shifting alliances across the political spectrum. It also highlights that housing imaginaries are rarely isolated but can function as relational nodes within broader (socio-)spatial struggles. In this view, housing becomes a strategic terrain through which interconnected urban challenges, such as sustainability and civil participation, are negotiated. Prefigurative practices thus not only resist dominant systems but can also be used to link housing to broader urban transitions.

Institutionalization as continuity with compromise

This thesis confirms existing concerns about institutional co-optation of movements (Törnberg, 2021) yet adds nuance by demonstrating that institutionalization can offer continuity without total loss of values. Historical cases show how some squatted spaces were legalized or institutionalized alternatives were offered, which still function as long-standing mixed-use housing models enacting collective governance structures. These cases illustrate that institutionalization does not necessarily erase alternative imaginaries but rather modifies their form to fit institutional governance frameworks. This complements Miraftab's (2009) notions of insurgent planning as a hybrid form, challenging binary tactics of working with and against the system. The theoretical contribution here is a shift in analytical lens: from co-optation as failure or risk, to institutionalization as a contested but potentially stabilizing and transformative process. The thesis suggests that successful institutionalization requires mechanisms to safeguard core values. Additionally, the lack of scaling of these initiatives shows the rigid nature of the dominant regime. While isolated projects may persist and be successful due to institutional compromise, their inability to expand or influence broader housing policy signals how the regime absorbs alternatives without proper change. Without scaling and safeguarding core values, institutionalization may serve regime production rather than transformation, to return to Törnberg (2021)'s transition pathways.

Beyond alignment: porosity as a condition for transformation

Notably, this study questions the assumption that (socio-political) transition depends on the alignment of landscape pressures, niche innovation, and regime opportunities (Geels, 2002; Törnberg, 2021). Instead, it proposes porosity as a missing condition. Inspired by Boer's (2023) 'smooth city' critique, porosity enables experimentation and the coexistence of friction and conflict. This contrasts with the efficiency and control of the smooth city. As argued by Boer (2023), porosity is not just a condition to be observed, but a quality that can be designed and governed for. It allows for alternative and informal practices to enter and, potentially, reshape urban life without being immediately absorbed or erased. This thesis proposes porosity as an extension to the MLP, addressing the critique that not all transformation depends on an alignment of MLP pressures, some depend on structural openness. Drawing on the concept of institutional prefiguration (Lawford & Sareen, 2025), the research reframes regimes not as fixed systems, but as structures that can be reshaped. Institutional prefiguration emphasizes the design of governance conditions that enable and protect bottom-up experimentation and prefigurative practices. Porosity thus emerges not only as a spatial condition but as a governance principle. This adds a new layer to MLP thinking by shifting the focus from moments of alignment to adding the conditions that make regime openness possible in the first place.

Post-neoliberal turns and the relevance of alternatives

Finally, the results of this research indicate that housing governance appears to be at a potential turning point. While neoliberalism has long dominated housing policy, recent years show signs of a post-neoliberal discourse (Flynn & Montalbano, 2024). International (economic) organizations increasingly acknowledge the challenges of market-driven housing. However, the results show how this shift is uneven. Even as (local) governments discursively promote housing as a human right, the post-neoliberal shift does not necessarily indicate a return to more state control, as expected by Flynn & Montalbano (2024). This research reveals that post-neoliberal discourse also delegates responsibilities to citizens and grassroots initiatives, under the name of 'collective citymaking'. Scholarship has long warned that shifting governance onto citizens can reinforce inequalities, with Shelton & Lodato (2019), for example, arguing that 'smart citizen' rhetoric enables neoliberal state withdrawal. However, nostalgia for state control is also undesirable, according to Gotby (2025). Even within left-wing discourse, a return to mid-20th-century social housing models is rejected. They argue that the mass housing programs of the welfare state were not neutral or universally accessible. Rather, Gotby (2025) calls for reimagining housing as a site of collective life and political organizing, emphasizing the role of alternatives in achieving a more sustainable and inclusive future. Together, these insights highlight the limitations of both state retreat and welfare state nostalgia. This argument underscores the need for collaborative structures that rethink housing governance beyond the traditional pathways.

In conclusion, the findings of this research confirm and challenge the existing literature. The study confirms insights about the performative and symbolic nature of imaginaries and the risks and rewards of institutionalization. However, the thesis also presents various contributions that improve theoretical understanding. Most importantly, it suggests 'porosity' as a necessary condition for transformation. This enhances MLP theory, which often focuses on alignment rather than structural openness. It also broadens the typology of transition pathways by exploring transformation outside of institutional pathways, such as through 'engaged withdrawal' or symbolic rupture. In contrast to other studies, this research observed a relative absence of these efforts. This was likely due to choosing institutional engagement as a focus point. This suggests that when institutional engagement is constrained, as observed in this study, movements may turn to coalition-building. Finally, this study adds to a large body of literature that treats housing as a deeply socio-political and ideological space, rather than merely a technical or supply-side issue. Beyond these theoretical implications, the study also holds practical implications, as addressed in the next section.

5.3 Policy & design recommendations

Building on the previous sections, this set of recommendations presents policy and design strategies that can inform urban governance. The following proposals are grounded in the thesis's empirical and theoretical contributions. The aim is not to prescribe fixed solutions but to suggest principles and entry points that can inform both spatial and institutional design when working towards a more responsive and inclusive housing system.

5.3.1 Design for porosity

According to Boer (2023), urban governance should not plan for seamlessness or efficiency but for fostering porosity. The research shows that many promising housing imaginaries fail not due to a lack of vision or initiative but because current spatial governance systems are badly equipped to tolerate, let alone facilitate, alternatives that do not align with dominant norms and structures. To support porosity, municipalities could implement legal and spatial instruments that create protective free zones or grey institutional zones for flexible (housing) initiatives. These may include (temporary) use agreements, exemptions from standard zoning regulations, or designated zones for social experimentation. Importantly, porosity is not the absence of regulation but the intentional flexibility within it. For example, cities could adopt stepped recognition models where informal initiatives are granted provisional support that is aimed toward negotiated formalization over time. Such mechanisms allow for closing the gap between niches and the regime and acknowledge that valuable spatial experiments may unfold outside traditional development pathways.

Examples from literature show that porosity can be designed into spatial and institutional structures to support (grassroots) experimentation and institutional innovation. In Dublin, for instance, Bresnihan & Byrne (2015) argue that porosity can be created by supporting urban commons to be created from the bottom up. In this case, some initiatives sought cooperation or support from public institutions. Allowing these DIY spaces to emerge, the city facilitates a form of urban commons created through collective action rather than institutionalized planning. Specific examples arising from spatial and institutional flexibility can often be found in domains other than housing. In the energy sector, Lawford & Sareen (2025) show how institutional prefiguration supports community energy development through 'spaces of orchestration'. These spaces depart from centralized systems to achieve more resilient and 'pro-poor' solutions. It is about the importance of joint effort among institutional levels to create new spaces for action and reform without being prematurely rejected by a rigid regime. In the context of climate governance, porosity often takes the form of 'policy sandboxes' or 'living labs', referring to real-life experiments that temporarily loosen regulations to create space for innovation. For example, van Neste et al. (2025) describe a climate adaptation living lab in Montreal, where institutional and physical space was created to test climate adaptation strategies in a real-life setting and with the active participation of civil society actors.

When turning to the domain of housing, these 'living labs' or 'policy sandboxes' remain rare. Living labs concerning housing are usually tied to initiatives aiming to upgrade or retrofit social housing in collaboration with residents (Bridi et al., 2022) or to experiment with more regenerative and sustainable forms of housing (Climate Smart Village, 2023). Experimenting with other ways of living and organizing housing is scarcer. An interesting exception is the model of Community Land Trusts (CLTs), which originated from grassroots resistance to speculation but has gradually secured formal recognition in some institutional contexts. Meehan (2014), for example, defines CLTs as a social invention in affordable housing. In Boston, for example, a community-controlled entity holds land collectively, leasing homes to individual residents. The model is celebrated for ensuring long-term affordability. Moreover, it empowers communities by celebrating collective participation and governance. In this case, institutional features helped to support this model through legal flexibility, institutional cooperation, and additional funding by securing municipal grants (Meehan, 2014). Together, these examples from within and beyond the housing domain illustrate that designing for porosity requires intentional flexibility in policy and spatial planning. By creating institutional and physical spaces that allow experimentation, such as urban commons, living labs, and places of community ownership, governments can support the emergence and evolution of alternative housing imaginaries. The following policy and design recommendations outline how such porosity can be actively facilitated:

Acknowledge and support prefigurative value

Urban governance must recognize informal and activist initiatives as prefigurative practices with shared values to improve the city's future. As the policy analysis pointed out, the municipality of Amsterdam is unaware of the prefigurative value of alternative housing initiatives. This is especially clear through the total absence of housing references in the city's innovation strategy (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2023b). Instead of treating grassroots initiatives or activism as temporary disruptions that need to be controlled, they should be acknowledged as legitimate voices in urban transformation. To do so, policymakers could formally recognize housing experimentation as part of innovation policy. More specifically, policymakers could integrate small-scale grant schemes or reserve physical space for community-based experimentation. Crucially, informal actors should be included in the governance process. As shown by Bridi et al. (2022), this can be done by adapting a living lab approach to housing. To successfully support prefigurative value, the CLT case of Boston (Meehan, 2014) shows that recognition and support at an early stage are essential for realizing and safeguarding core prefigurative values.

Expand the boundaries of legitimacy

As noted in the previous point, institutions should broaden their criteria for what counts as a legitimate actor or intervention in housing and urban planning. This means including informal collectives, activist movements, and community-led experiments in consultation, funding, and spatial decision-making processes, even when they operate outside traditional frameworks. To do so, public participation tools should be opened to less traditional actors. Another interesting direction is to develop evaluation frameworks that account for social value. In parallel, expanding boundaries means that legal definitions must be revised to accommodate this shift. These changes require new governance arrangements that bridge grassroots initiatives and institutional frameworks. As highlighted by Lawford & Sareen's (2025) energy communities, institutional 'spaces of orchestration' offer a model for collaborative governance where marginalized groups and informal actors are included through alliances with institutional actors sharing comparable transformative values.

Avoid instrumentalizing alternatives as policy patches

Building upon the critique of cultural incubator policies (Draaisma, 2016), alternative housing models should not be reduced to short-term fixes for experimentation or to address shortages. Instead, policymakers must support these initiatives as part of broader systemic change, ensuring their core values are preserved as they evolve or scale. To avoid instrumentalization, long-term support frameworks should be in place to enable alternative initiatives to become stable components of the (housing) system and long-term development visions. This requires, for example, multi-year support plans, structural governance coalitions, and long-term evaluation criteria. This recommendation fits Lawford & Sareen's (2025) suggestion for a form of value-based collaboration.

Embrace flexibility in urban design and spatial planning

Finally, urban design should embed greater flexibility, both in accommodating change over time and limiting restrictive frameworks. The value of co-ops, for example, is increasingly recognized in policy. However, they remain subject to strict regulation. Planning frameworks should prioritize open-ended programming and adaptive strategies that enable alternatives to emerge and evolve without requiring total suitability with formal systems. Flexibly using space could include creating zoning overlays or experimental areas where conventional typologies, usage types, and density rules are loosened. This adds to embracing porosity as a design and policy principle, allowing spatial and institutional layers to remain intentionally open to negotiation. As Boer (2023) argues, resisting the 'smoothness' of dominant planning enables the city to become a platform for friction. Allowing friction provides space for alternative visions to inform mainstream planning from within.

To make these recommendations tangible, a counterfactual design for Hotel Mokum was developed (Figure 9). What if, instead of eviction, the site had been supported as a legitimate space for grassroots prefiguration? The design imagines Hotel Mokum as a 'space of orchestration', where informal practices are supported and gradually expanded through porous institutions. This visually represents the alternative housing ideas found in this research that call for a more flexible and collectively shaped urban environment. A more detailed description can be found in Appendix 4.

5.3.2 Design for porosity: A speculative vision

To make the recommendations presented more tangible, the following visual (Figure 9) explores a counterfactual scenario of how Hotel Mokum could have evolved under a more porous governance framework. The currently still vacant building (Miltenburg, 2024) is reimagined as an urban common. This illustrates how it potentially could have developed if supported and facilitated rather than evicted. Drawing on concepts such as prefigurative planning (Davoudi, 2023) and institutional prefiguration (Lawford & Sareen, 2025), the design aims to visualize spatial and institutional possibilities. A conceptual sectional axonometric translates the earlier presented recommendations into a layered sketch. A more detailed explanation of the design process is provided in Appendix 4.

DESIGN SYNTHESIS

Envisioning & facilitating imaginaries

Designing the not-yet:
A counterfactual and speculative design

What if Hotel Mokum had not been evicted, but instead facilitated as a physical site for grass-roots experimentation?

Potential timeline:

1 | Occupation

Building occupied, authorities recognize prefigurative values so open space for dialogue

2 | Restoration

Space is being restored, municipality enables safe use through inspections and support

3 | Negotiation

Collective governance, city grants temporary use status and negotiates with owner

4 | Facilitation

Public funding channels and institutional advisory structures are activated to support continuity

5 | Transformation

Hotel Mokum as urban commons, a living example of autonomy within the system

Photo of Hotel Mokum by Camiel Mudde (retrieved via de Gruyl, 2021), edited by author.

RECOMMENDATIONS

How the thesis recommendations are reflected and which tools it would take:

commons: This is not redevelopment, this is reimagining

ACKNOWLEDGE PREFIGURATIVE VALLUE

The timeline shows municipal support rather than immediate eviction. This would require zoning tools that allow self-organization and negotiation structures with the owners of the building.

EXPAND THE BOUNDARIES OF LEGITIMACY

The reimagined Hotel Mokum showcase non-standard forms of usage, including mixed-use collective living organized through working groups. To facilitate this, a legal shell (e.g., through a housing association or foundation, is needed to allow residents to govern without ownership.

AVOID INSTRUMENTALIZING ALTERNATIVES

The building and its functions are self-managed, run by residents and neighbors. Rather than outsourced participation, the commons operate autonomously. Additionally, due to the timeline support, a permanent structure can be realized without relying on temporary support.

EMBRACE FLEXIBILITY

Each flor has a different use and user group. Some stay long, others are temporary visitors. The building is an ecosystem, that needs flexibility to grow. A commons fund could facilitate this process, with small grants for public functions but without rigid goals or demands.

Figure 9: A speculative counterfactual scenario for Hotel Mokum

5.4 Relevance for knowledge users

In addition to the recommendations, the research offers relevant insights for various knowledge users. While its focus is academic, the findings correspond directly to challenges faced by a diverse range of actors attempting to navigate or reimagine the dominant housing regime. Adding to the previous recommendations, this section provides actor-specific entry points for strategic intervention.

Urban policymakers and municipal officials

The study shows that while policy increasingly adopts post-neoliberal rhetoric, including mentions of participation, experimentation, and commoning, it often fails to create durable openings for bottom-up transformations. Officials can use the research insights to evaluate how current procedures exclude grassroots actors. This requires a critical evaluation of rigid zoning, overregulation, or limited definitions of what is seen as legitimate in housing and urban governance. More reflexive, permeable policy frameworks could be developed that acknowledge and protect informal experimentation without requiring full institutional absorption. This includes rethinking criteria for participation, temporary use, and spatial commons. A more informative overview of the research insights proposed for policymakers is included in the policy and design recommendations in section 5.3.

Housing cooperatives and self-managed initiatives

The research highlights tensions between autonomy and institutionalization that are also directly relevant for groups in the process of gaining formal governance, including co-ops, multi-generational living, or tiny housing. The findings can help such groups navigate the trade-offs of institutional engagement and avoid reproducing the exclusions they initially resisted. The findings discussed provide concrete reflections on governance structures, internal dynamics, and the fragility of collective identity under formal pressure. Initiatives exploring forms of commoning, shared ownership, or alternative tenure can use this analysis to learn lessons, get inspired, and design more resilient and values-aligned governance models. A more informative overview of the research insights proposed for designing for porosity is included in section 5.3.

Grassroots and activist networks

For activists involved in proposing or prefiguring alternatives, this study offers insights into the symbolic and strategic dimensions of visibility and the use of physical and online space. It shows how imaginaries are not only tools of critique but also active interventions into urban space. Activists can use these insights to reflect on how alternative imaginaries are assembled and how institutionalization can lead to co-optation. A significant result for these knowledge users is the importance of conveying a coherent narrative, framing the housing crisis as a symptom of broader political decisions. A recommendation also includes seeking alliances with other alternative or activist movements and framing the housing issue as integral to other challenges, such as climate change. This reframing could increase resources and public support for the matter. Additionally, this expanded framing enables housing imaginaries to reach beyond their immediate domain, positioning them as catalysts for change.

Intermediary organizations

The research illustrates a gap between grassroots alternatives and the institutional regime, highlighting the potential for intermediary organizations to fill this gap. These could be design studios, living labs, housing associations, or other organizations operating in the gap between grassroots initiatives and institutional systems. Intermediary organizations play a crucial role in shaping the conditions under which alternatives can gain traction. Housing associations already increasingly engage in experimental collaborations with resident groups and cooperative models (Ymere, 2022). The research insights suggest that intermediary organizations should develop even more tools to ensure flexibility, participation, and adaptive use of space. These actors can engage in institutional prefiguration by orchestrating the conditions that enable alternatives to take root (Lawford & Sareen, 2025). In the historical cases studied, housing associations played a key mediating role, facilitating access to property under collective governance arrangements, offering legal support and advice, and negotiating zoning exceptions. This stresses how intermediary organizations can mobilize systemic support.

Academics and researchers

Beyond its societal significance, this discussion also emphasizes the role of academics and researchers as knowledge users. This thesis provides insights that can help fuel academic debates about a range of theoretical concepts. However, presenting these abstract concepts within a specific urban setting adds to a growing body of research that directly connects theory and practice. Researchers examining the relationship between activism and governance can apply he study's multi-level methodological framework. Furthermore, investigating Amsterdam's policy landscape enhances comparative studies on post-neoliberalism, showing that discursive openness does not necessarily translate into institutional openness. Finally, this research addresses the role of research in the search for alternatives and to break with the 'crisis of imagination' in order to address modern-day metropolitan challenges in innovative and integral ways.

5.5 Research evaluation & directions for future research

By applying the urgent question of housing to the abstract concepts of imagination and prefiguration, the strength of this research lies in showing how (oppositional) grassroots actors, such as squatting movements, actively shape and enact alternative visions. The study advances a multi-level understanding of imaginaries by showing how they are both discursively and materially enacted in an empirical case. It also adds to research gaps about the interaction of grassroots imaginaries with institutional structures, revealing how grassroots practices' transformative potential depends on the openness of the regimes they confront or their power to persist outside of formal structures. Several methodological strengths improved the reliability and depth of the findings. Using triangulation across methods and sources created a solid foundation for gaining insights. This research showed how imaginaries translate across history, discourse, lived experiences, and institutional structures by offering a multi-scalar, interdisciplinary approach. Beyond these theoretical and methodological strengths, the research also had several limitations that also propose promising suggestions for future research.

***Limitation**: Limited generalizability*

First, this research focused on Amsterdam as a single case study. It is rooted in the city's history of housing activism and progressive spatial governance. While this context adds depth to the analysis, it also limits how widely the findings can be applied to other urban areas with different political and legal systems. This means the conclusions are most valid for the context of Amsterdam. Even within Amsterdam, this focus may restrict how relevant the findings are beyond Mokum Kraakt and could lead to an overrepresentation of their story or strategy. Other emerging groups or decentralized efforts might express different views, tactics, or ways of engaging with institutions. Additionally, the study looks at contemporary squatting over a relatively short time period. While their symbolic momentum and visibility were analyzed in depth, the long-term effectiveness or impact of Mokum Kraakt's alternative vision remains uncertain. Still, the case offered a rich perspective to explore the complex interactions between activism and institutional structures. This approach provided deep insights into a specific context that can help us understand how the porosity of urban systems influences the potential for alternative visions to inspire change.

***Limitation**: Small interview sample*

The limited number of interviews also reflects a choice to focus on depth rather than a larger sample size or diverse insights. The goal was to engage closely with a few participants and have extended, open-ended conversations. These insights may have been diluted in the case of a bigger but more surface-level sample. Even with this small sample, the recurring insights indicate some saturation within the identified themes. However, a larger and more varied sample, especially from active squatters or those in legalized alternatives, could have improved the range of lived experiences and diversity in perspectives. This limitation mainly affected the diversity of findings about how imaginaries are lived and experienced. While the use of other data sources helped support the overall validity of the conclusions, a study like this could have benefited from more participation among potential interviewees. The lack of responses was largely due to current squatters being cautious about discussing their actions, and people in legalized alternatives already facing time constraints in their daily life, as mentioned in the results chapter.

***Limitation**: Lack of national and insider policy perspectives*

Finally, the policy analysis focused on the municipal level. Although Amsterdam's housing regime is a central site of governance with its responsibilities, national frameworks include fiscal and judicial policies that shape the municipal institutional environment. Leaving out national policy means that some conclusions about regime porosity remain specific to the local context. Additionally, the study did not include interviews with policymakers or municipal officials. Therefore, the analysis of institutional openness remains based on policy interpretations rather than insider insights. This limits the ability of this study to assess how regime actors interpret regime openness. Yet, this does not undermine the identification of key discursive patterns and strategic blind spots in municipal policy. Additionally, since the primary research scope was focused on grassroots actors, this limitation only moderately impacted the overall findings.

By weighing the impact of these limitations on the conclusions, it can be argued that the most significant limitation is the narrow scope of the interview sample, as it directly impacts the empirical grounding of lived experiences. The reliance on Mokum Kraakt also narrows this representativeness. In contrast, the case study approach and lack of national-level policy integration have more modest impacts on the conclusions. To address some of these limitations, future research could adopt other (creative) methodological approaches. The following suggestions could allow for a deeper and more nuanced exploration of the dynamics surfaced in this research.

***Further research**: Broadening actor perspectives*

Future research could use participatory or ethnographic methods in squatting communities to address the limits of a small interview sample and a narrow focus. This would help researchers access the lived experiences of lesser-known or decentralized initiatives. Future studies could also involve a broader range of people involved in housing alternatives. Interviews with municipal and housing association professionals or other housing experts could offer deeper insights into how institutions navigate these issues from within. Including lesser-known or decentralized grassroots initiatives would enrich the findings and show a broader range of ideas and strategies. Additionally, legalized housing alternatives also provide an interesting starting point for revealing system porosity. Housing co-ops, for example, gained visibility as a policy instrument and community solution; however, focused research is needed on their governance structures, internal dynamics, and role within broader transition pathways. Future studies could examine how cooperatives, or other institutionalized alternatives, balance autonomy and institutional support, and under what conditions they preserve or lose their prefigurative edge.

***Further research**: Methodological innovation*

Second, there is significant potential for methodological deepening through more creative and participatory approaches. One promising direction is to invite participants to draw their vision for alternative housing or their ideal future city. This visual method allows participants to express values or imaginaries that may not surface through verbal interviews. Additionally, a more creative methodological approach could enable broader engagement since it makes complex themes accessible to a larger public. Rather than asking about a complex concept like imaginaries, making respondents draw their ideal future vision is way more accessible. It is especially true for participants unfamiliar with academic concepts or policy discourse. This could potentially also enhance the willingness to contribute to the research. As such, creative methodologies can support inclusivity and participation as well as contribute to more grounded insights.

***Further research**: Longitudinal and comparative research*

Several of this study's insights, such as the fragility of momentum or the selective absorption of alternative visions, would benefit from a longitudinal approach. Tracking initiatives over time could reveal how imaginaries evolve (or dissolve) over time and under shifting political and institutional conditions. By integrating this with the suggestion for adopting an ethnographic approach, following a squatting collective for an extended period of time could result in interesting insights into both the internal and external frictions influencing activist movements. Additionally, comparative studies across cities or national contexts could also expose how different housing regimes engage with alternative visions. This would address the limited generalizability of this case study and offer context-sensitive insights into (regime) porosity and transformation.

***Further research**: Designing for institutional porosity*

Finally, the findings highlight the need to explore how institutions can be intentionally designed to support experimentation without fully regulating and absorbing it. Beyond the already proposed design and policy recommendations, future research could investigate how institutional and spatial design can be used to achieve some degree of porosity. For urbanism and urban design researchers, this presents an opportunity to rethink the role of spatial design. Here, spatial design is not just a tool for physical transformation but also a means to enable alternatives. Additionally, institutional design can be used to facilitate the conditions required for spatial design to be successful. This asks for interdisciplinary work bridging social sciences and urban design, ideally using participatory experiments or design-led interventions that test porous governance.

Together, these directions emphasize the need to keep studying alternative housing ideas and to broaden how we study them. Research should play a role in the debate that we do not simply need more housing, but also to build, live, and organize differently. Future research should focus on understanding how to organize and design housing in new ways. It should also try out different methods for involving various groups, from the general public to professionals, in imagining alternatives. Evolving research is essential for creating housing systems that are more just and inclusive, and that can play a role in addressing the intersecting metropolitan challenges faced by cities.

6 Conclusion

This research explored alternative imaginaries and the transformative potential of squatting movements in Amsterdam. Motivated by the ongoing housing crisis and the structural exclusions resulting from urban development, the research aimed to understand squatting and urban resistance not merely as a (historical) protest tactic but as an active and ongoing site where alternative futures for housing and urban governance are imagined and negotiated. Using the concept of imaginaries as a central analytical lens, this study examined how squatters challenge dominant notions of housing and what is seen as legitimate or desirable. In short, the main question asked how the alternative imaginaries of historical and contemporary squatting movements challenge the dominant logics of housing across its different dimensions, and whether, how, and under what conditions, they might influence the housing regime. Central to the empirical investigation was both the historical context and the more recent squatter collective Mokum Kraakt. Their discourse and practices served as a lens to understand how (radical) housing alternatives continue to be articulated and prefigured in practice. To conduct this research, a qualitative, multi-method case study approach was adopted. The research was guided by four subquestions, each with a distinct focus and method.

First, a historical analysis of key moments mapped the evolution of squatting movements in Amsterdam. This illustrated their enduring presence as a force of resistance and alternative imaginaries. From the necessity-driven start to the social movement it became in the 1980s to the increasingly repressive environment of the 21st century, squatting has continuously surfaced to fill the cracks of the system with its lived alternatives. While it can be argued that early squatting has considerable influence on urban governance, participatory planning, and spatial and cultural experimentation, more recent squatting turned out to be more marginal and symbolic. Nevertheless, its performative and prefigurative character, persistence in a restricted environment, and ongoing ability to create momentum demonstrate its continued relevance as a model of urban resistance and imagination.

Second, through a thematic content analysis of the Mokum Kraakt movement, this research examined how a more recent squatting collective presents and prefigures its alternative housing imaginary. The analysis presents a vision of housing as a commons rooted in anti-extractive values. This imaginary challenges dominant ideas of ownership, commodification, and standardization. Instead, it advocates for relational housing based on care and solidarity. The analysis revealed the imaginary not to be purely discursive or utopian but actively enacted in both online and physical space. It can thus be concluded that Mokum Kraakt constructs a counter-narrative to the dominant housing system that is both material and symbolic. It acts both as a tool to expose the exclusionary character of the dominant system and to show alternative possibilities.

Third, the research explored how people experience and manage alternative housing initiatives by analyzing semi-structured interviews. The answers showed how activists and residents envision different ways of living together. Essentially, they experiment with collective governance to achieve affordable housing. However, the interviews also uncovered the challenges of balancing alternative values while ensuring continuity. When squats become legalized or alternatives born from struggle become part of formal systems, they often feel torn between original values and the search for stability and continuity. The historical analysis reveals that these negotiations between autonomy and institutionalization are not new. Nevertheless, they remain central to the challenge of sustaining alternative housing practices over time, especially in a more restricted environment.

Finally, the (critical discourse) policy analysis examined how housing imaginaries are facilitated or constrained in current institutional frameworks. While recent policies increasingly reference post-neoliberal narratives and affordability, the dominant strategies in solving the housing problem remain rooted in managerial and technocratic solutions. Values linked to the squatting imaginary, such as collective governance or anti-speculation, surface in policy discourse but are often depoliticized and reframed in instrumental ways. The analysis suggests that the system is willing to absorb formalized elements of alternatives, such as co-ops, but resistant to their systemic implications, such as collective ownership or anti-speculation and rights-based models. Squatting, as a practice and a politics, remains firmly positioned outside the bounds of legitimacy, while more formalized alternatives, such as tiny housing or co-operatives, can only take place within the boundaries of formalization and regulation.

Together, these analyses give a nuanced answer to the main research question: **How have squatting movements in Amsterdam envisioned and enacted alternative housing imaginaries in the past and present, and what is their transformative potential?** Squatting movements in Amsterdam have historically played a significant role in shaping housing imaginaries and influencing urban development. While their formal influence has diminished, their imaginaries continue to circulate through (online) discourse and small-scale symbolic and prefigurative actions. These imaginaries are not solely oppositional but also constructive in proposing different visions of housing and urban life. Yet their transformative potential is often conditional and, therefore, limited. Without structural openings in the regime, their impact remains fragile and often short-lived. However, as concluded, transformation does not necessarily occur through system change but also through the gradual diffusion of imaginaries and through coalition-building with other prefigurative actors. This means that alternative imaginaries, and squatting as a tactic, continue to matter as a generator and facilitator of visions that can challenge and reshape the boundaries of what is seen as possible or legitimate.

In doing so, this research contributes to several bodies of literature. It advances the understanding of urban imaginaries by treating them not only as discursive constructs but as materially enacted and spatially negotiated phenomena. The research, furthermore, added empirical insights for the socio-political turn of transition studies, adapting the concept of transition pathways to a grassroots urban context. This showed how radical imaginaries navigate tensions between rejection and negotiation. This allowed for a more complex understanding of the interaction between grassroots struggle and dominant regimes, adding the idea of institutional porosity beyond multi-level alignment. Finally, the research also enriches debates on prefigurative politics by providing empirical insights into how alternative futures are organized in everyday urban life. Rather than romanticizing the squatting culture, the thesis offers an empirical example of urban complexity and questions of power.

Beyond theory, the study holds practical and societal relevance. In a time of intersecting metropolitan challenges, the ability to imagine and enact alternatives is crucial. Although squatting movements are frequently dismissed as a thing of the past, they serve as a reminder that there are alternative ways to organize housing and urban governance. Their imaginaries push us to question the norms that guide current systems and invite us to explore forms of living based on alternative values. The lesson for a range of housing professionals is to facilitate the value of alternative initiatives by creating institutional frameworks that accommodate alternative ways of doing and thinking. The research's findings matter because they not only acknowledge that housing problems require more than just supply-driven solutions. It requires us to rethink the norms we use to build, govern, and inhabit our homes. Maybe we do not just have to build more, but also differently. Taking grassroots alternatives seriously reveals not only what is currently lacking but also what is already successful on the margins. These margins are often where the cracks of the dominant regime are most visible and where grassroots alternatives respond in innovative ways.

To drive these transitions, this research points to several directions for future research. The knowledge of how alternatives arise and adapt may be improved by a more comprehensive mapping of alternative housing imaginaries across movements and cities. Additionally, incorporating viewpoints from institutional actors may enhance understanding of the obstacles and enablers of institutional porosity. While ethnographic studies could provide insight into negotiation and prefigurative practices, longitudinal studies could assist in tracking the evolution of imaginaries across time. Future research may also examine how imaginaries spread across digital environments or how visual media support their legitimation and dissemination. Ultimately, this research suggests that squatting matters not only because of what it opposes but because of what it proposes. Despite being fragile and contested, the ideas behind squatting movements show and create alternatives within the margins of the system. These acts of resistance and imagination are crucial in broadening perspectives. In the face of intersecting metropolitan challenges, the persistence of alternative imaginaries reminds us that the city is never finished and that its future can be shaped by those who dare to imagine and act differently.

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8 Appendices

8.1 Appendix I

Additional information interviews

As part of the research, semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain insights into the enactment and negotiation of alternative housing imaginaries in Amsterdam, with emphasis on the squatter movement. Interviewees were selected purposively for their capacity to reflect on either (or both) lived experiences in alternative housing and expert knowledge. This approach was chosen to ensure a multi-layered understanding of urban resistance, both from historical and contemporary points of view. Through purposive sampling, individuals with direct involvement in alternative housing, activist networks, or urban design practice were approached. However, securing interviews proved challenging due to time constraints and research fatigue among potential participants. As a result, the total number of interviews is limited. Therefore, longer, in-depth interviews, each lasting approximately one hour, were used to gain rich insights. This allowed for a detailed exploration of relevant themes despite the small sample size. Table 4 presents an overview of interviewees, categorized by their relevance and the unique perspectives they provided.

Table 4: Overview of interviewees

#	Description	Relevance	Insights
1	Expert interview + lived experiences.	Author and critic in architecture and design. Former squatter and contributor to Pak Mokum Terug.	Insights into urban democracy, the role of squatting, alternative spaces, and the design concept of 'porosity'.
2	Lived experiences.	Resident in alternative housing originating from urban resistance and squatting.	Reflection on living in alternative housing, second-generation perspective, intergenerational continuity.
3	Expert interview + lived experiences.	Resident in legalized former squat, architect perspective on adaptive and mixed use.	Combination of experience as a squatter, the transition period, and architectural knowledge of housing.
4	Lived experiences.	Squatter involved in contemporary collectives and the publishing initiative.	Deep understandings of present-day squatting practices, political motivations, and prefigurative strategies.
5	Expert interview + lived experiences.	Resident in alternative housing originating from urban resistance and squatting + (retired) expert in urban development.	Historical context and connection with contemporary alternatives. Insights into urban resistance as tool for change.

All interviews were held in April and May 2025. They were conducted in a semi-structured format, some including a tour of the building. All were recorded with permission and fully transcribed for analysis. For ethical reasons and in accordance with informed consent agreements, the identities of interviewees are anonymized in all research outputs. An example interview guide is provided on the next page, illustrating the general structure and scope of the conversations. While each interview was tailored to the individual's experiences, this does provide an overview of the included themes across all interviews. The interview transcripts were used to code the interview data in Atlas.ti using interview themes. The subthemes were coded inductively. This means that they were based on the unique insights from the interviewees, without a predefined coding scheme. The recordings were securely stored and deleted after transcription. Importantly, all transcripts were anonymized. All interviews were conducted in Dutch. For the purpose of this thesis, selected quotes were translated into English. While care was taken to preserve the original meaning, some nuance or context may be lost in translation. Translation was done by the researcher to ensure consistency and context-sensitivity.

8.1.1. Example interview guide

Opening/introduction
- Brief personal introduction of the researcher and research topic: *e.g., For my master's thesis, I am researching alternative housing imaginaries in Amsterdam, especially how (legalized) squatting and self-management initiatives articulate and enact different visions of urban life and how these alternatives interact with policy, space, and institutions*.
- Ask for consent to record the interviews.
- Explain the anonymization procedure.
- Ask whether they have any questions about the research and/or process.

Personal context & background
- Could you briefly introduce yourself and your connection to initiative/movement/project X?
- Can you describe how X originated and what it stands for?
- What are the guiding principles or goals of this initiative/movement/project?

Theme 1: Living the alternative
- What makes living/working here different from more conventional housing models?
- How do you experience collectivity or self-governance practiced in daily life?

Theme 2: Governing the alternative
- Are you experiencing tensions or challenges in maintaining/legitimizing this model?
- Are there generational differences in vision or involvement?

Theme 3: Negotiating the alternative
- How would you describe your relationship with institutions?
- In your view, does institutional negotiation help or hinder your autonomy?
- Do you see a risk of co-optation or a dilution of values?

Theme 4: Scaling the alternative
- What do you think of policies like broedplaatsenbeleid or temporary use regulations?
- How do you see your initiative/movement/project as a form of critique of the dominant system?
- What alternative visions for the city do you have?
- Do you see possibilities/limitations regarding scaling/replicating your initiative/alternative?
- What do you see as promising examples of initiatives/movements to influence housing policy and urban development?
- What would your alternative vision for Amsterdam look like?

Closing
- Any final thoughts or recommendations for this research?
- Are there other people, collectives, or initiatives you think I should talk to?
- Do you have ideas for a design or policy-oriented component based on your experiences?

8.2 Appendix 2

Additional information thematic content analysis

This appendix outlines the methodological steps used to conduct the thematic content analysis of Mokum Kraakt's public documents. The analysis aimed to explore how alternative housing imaginaries are presented and enacted in the context of Amsterdam's squatting movement. The approach followed a dual-layered structure, distinguishing between the dimensions of the imaginary (Layer 1) and the assemblage of material and immaterial factors (Layer 2). The coding was done using Atlas.ti, using a deductive coding scheme based on literature, supplemented with some inductive insights.

Step 1 | **Document selection**: Relevant materials were selected using purposive sampling, focusing on publicly available materials. As a highly visible example, Mokum Kraakt was the main focus point of this thematic content analysis. The documents include their 193 Instagram posts (2021-2024), their book 'Pak Mokum Terug' (2023), and their documentary about Hotel Mokum (2024). For the purpose of this thesis, selected quotes were translated into English. While care was taken to preserve the original meaning, some nuance or context may be lost in translation. Translation was done independently by the researcher to ensure consistency and context-sensitivity.

Step 2 | **Development of coding schemes**: Since this question was both about the content of the imaginary and the strategies of the movement, a two-layer coding framework was developed. Layer 1 categorizes the thematic dimensions of housing, while Layer 2 captures the material and immaterial elements that give form to the assemblage. The scheme was primarily based on literature, but some inductive additions were made as new empirical themes emerged. Illustrative quotes for key themes are included in the results, a full quote-by-quote breakdown is available upon request.

Table 5: Coding schemes thematic content analysis

Layer 1 | Dimensions of (alternative) housing What aspects of housing are being imagined that present alternatives to the dominant imaginary?		
Dimension	**Sub-dimension**	**Description/memo**
Social	Collective living/ shared governance	Imaginaries that resist individualized housing by advocating for shared, communal forms of living. Includes mentions of community, shared spaces, and shared governance.
	Solidarity & care	Expressions of mutual support between residents or the broader community. Includes care networks, solidarity with other struggles, and actions rooted in empathy.
	Inclusion/exclusion	Critiques of who is allowed to access housing, especially undocumented people, youth, low-income residents etc. Includes aspirational visions of inclusive housing.
	Nontraditional family structures	Challenges normative family units. Includes queer collectives, community-based living, includes ideas of family redefined through affinity rather than blood/marriage.
Political	Housing as a human right	Frames housing as a fundamental need and right, opposed to being a market-driven commodity. Includes explicit rights-based language and a rejection of neoliberal politics.
	Right to the city	Calls for democratic control over urban space. Often tied to slogans about spatial rights or critiques of exclusionary planning practices.
	Self-governance/ autonomy	Emphasis on autonomy in living arrangements and governance, including horizontal decision-making, collective ownership, and stateless organization.
	Political critique*	Direct policy rejections, challenging neoliberal governance, housing crisis policy failure. Includes critiques of state repression and depoliticization.
Spatial	Reclaiming space	Taking over vacant or underused buildings as a political act. Includes references to spatial privatization or abandoning.
	Urban identity*	Squatting as an act of place-making and resistance against exclusionary and monocultural development.
	Spatial injustice/ gentrification	Critiques of uneven development and displacement. Includes narratives around forced eviction, gentrification, rising rents, and urban exclusion.
	Informal use of space	Use of space outside of formal planning. Challenges the legitimacy of top-down spatial control. Includes themes like squats, pop-ups, or alternative zoning practices.

Financial	Anti-commodification*	Rejects the logic of housing as an investment or commodity, but also commercialization of the city, overtourism, city marketing etc.
	Speculation/profit vs human use	Contrasts human needs with profit motives in housing. Look for critiques of real estate speculation and texts on protest banners.
	Affordability & precarity	Focuses on economic instability and the inability to access or retain secure housing. Includes testimonies of precariousness or homelessness.
	Economic exclusion	Focuses on systemic barriers to housing access rooted in class inequality, or discriminatory financial structures.
	Collective ownership/ commoning	Envisions housing held and managed collectively rather than privately. Challenges private property norms and promotes models like co-ops or community land trusts.
Physical	Sustainability	Includes ecological consciousness in housing imaginaries, including energy, materials, and broader planetary concerns. Includes sustainable retrofitting or climate concerns.
	DIY housing/ adaptive reuse*	Emphasizes grassroots building or repair practices, often done collectively and mostly without formal permission.
	Visibility of resistance	Making resistance visible through aesthetics, banners, murals, slogans. Often performative or communicative in public space.
	Mixed-use buildings	Combination of functions within single buildings. Challenges norms around zoning, community life, and multifunctionality.

**Inductive code derived from empirical data, not predefined by the theoretical framework.*

Table 6: Coding schemes thematic content analysis

Layer 2 | Imaginary assemblage How are the alternative housing imaginaries constructed, communicated, and materialized?		
Dimension	**Sub-dimension**	**Description/memo**
Immaterial	Discursive imaginaries	Use of language, slogans, manifestos, or storytelling to articulate an alternative worldview. Includes both discursive critique and future visions.
	Collective memory	References to historical struggles, squatting heritage, or past occupations to legitimize current imaginaries and root them in shared memory.
	Symbolic representations	Use of metaphors, signs, visuals, and art that communicate political meaning beyond the literal. Includes affective and symbolic examples.
	Mediums & circulation	Channels through which imaginaries circulate. Focuses on message spread, audience, and communicative strategy.
	Lived experiences	Emotions and affective states that reflect how people internalize and perform the imaginary in their daily lives.
	Temporal visioning	Visioning of possible futures or nostalgic pasts. Includes utopian claims, urgency, and future scenarios of what seems possible or necessary.
Material	Prefigurative action	Practices that bring the alternative into being in the here-and-now, like collective living, care structures, or community use of squatted buildings.
	Physical configurations	Material/spatial forms that express or support the imaginary – occupied buildings, community kitchens, protest, etc.
	Infrastructural interaction	Interactions with material, legal, or technical infrastructures that support or limit imaginaries, includes access to amenities, tools, legal support etc.
	Institutional interaction	Moments where imaginaries encounter formal institutions, like policy negotiations, zoning conflicts, or state enforcement.
	Material support networks	Informal systems that provide physical, financial, or logistical support alternative housing imaginaries. Including, donations / solidarity networks.
	Mediums & visual materiality	Physical and visual formats (banners, slogans, facades) that make the imaginary visible in urban space.

Step 3 | **Thematic coding**: All documents were uploaded and coded in Atlas.ti. The first coding cycle focused on Layer 1 to identify the thematic content of housing imaginaries across the five dimensions. The second cycle focused on Layer 2, tracing how these imaginaries were assembled. The codes were systematically applied to identify recurring patterns, framings, and references to institutional actors or alternatives. Some inductive sub-dimensions were added to reflect new empirical insights.

Step 4 | **Memo writing**: Analytical memos were written for each document and key code group during and after coding. These memos synthesized patterns and highlighted interesting quotes. Memos served as bridges between raw data and interpretation, aiming for reflection and transparency.

Step 5 | **Results interpretation**: Findings from both layers were combined into a results chapter to construct a multidimensional understanding of the alternative imaginary. Attention was paid to how these alternative ideas and practices challenge dominant paradigms. Findings were interpreted in the light of the theoretical framework. The insights also contributed to a visualization of the movement's assemblage (Figure 7) and the following thematic analysis of Instagram posts (Figure 10):

Figure 10: Visual assemblage of Mokum Kraakt's alternative imaginary (source: @MokumKraakt, n.d.).

8.3 Appendix 3

Additional information policy analysis

This appendix outlines the coding framework, document selection, and methodological steps used in the policy analysis focusing on Amsterdam's housing and policy landscape. To systematically explore how dominant and alternative housing imaginaries are framed, legitimized, or marginalized in Amsterdam's policy landscape, the following approach was applied:

Step 1 | **Document selection**: Eleven policy documents were selected through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. The process began with several core strategic documents identified for their relevance to Amsterdam's long-term urban (housing) vision. From there, additional documents were included based on cross-references within the initial policies. The aim was to gather a broader set of regulatory, programmatic, and strategic documents. This ensured both depth and contextual coherence across the selected documents.

Table 7: Document overview policy analysis

Document	Year	Type	Translation/description
Woonagenda 2025	2017	Core housing strategy	Housing Agenda 2025 | Strategic vision outlining Amsterdam's housing priorities.
Woningbouwplan 2022-2028	2022	Core housing strategy	Housing Construction Plan 2022-2028 | Operational plan detailing targets for housing production, including strategies, typologies, and instruments.
Amsterdamse Aanpak Volkshuisvesting	2023	Core housing strategy	Amsterdam Public Housing Approach | Broad strategy to improve access to affordable housing.
Omgevingsvisie 2050	2021	Long-term spatial vision	Spatial Vision 2050 | Long-term integrated vision for Amsterdam's development up to 2050.
Broedplaatsenbeleid 2023-2026	2023	Programmatic	Creative Incubator Policy 2023-2026 | Programmatic policy supporting temporary and affordable spaces for artists and cultural entrepreneurs.
Actieplan Wooncoöperaties	2019	Programmatic	Housing Cooperative Action Plan | Action plan promoting the development of cooperative housing through support, funding, and legal tools.
Strategie Innovatie-districten	2023	Programmatic	Innovation Districts Strategy | Strategic policy aimed at fostering urban (mixed-use) innovation districts.
Expeditie Vrije Ruimte	2020	Programmatic	Free Space Policy | Exploratory policy framework to preserve and enable bottom-up, self-organized urban initiatives.
Bouw Zelf Samen	2022	Programmatic	Build Together Initiative | Programmatic encouraging citizen-led cooperative housing and self-build projects, with practical and legal guidance.
Huisvestigings-verordening	2025	Regulatory measures	Housing Ordinance | Regulatory framework governing housing allocation, anti-speculation measures, and other regulatory tools.
Aanscherping kraak- en ontruimingsbeleid	2019	Regulatory measures	Tightening of Squatting and Eviction Policy | Municipal letter explaining tightener anti-squatting and eviction rules.

Step 2 | **Development of coding scheme**: The coding scheme was informed by Flynn & Montalbano's (2024) work on post-neoliberal discourse, the Multi-Level Perspective of Geels (2002), and insights from Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1995). The CDA was used to uncover underlying assumptions and power relations embedded in policy language. The CDA lens helped to analyze dominant narratives and excluded perspectives. By focusing on the interplay between discourse and institutional practices, the analysis reveals the subtle ways in which policies reproduce and sustain socio-technical regimes. Codes were grouped into three analytical categories: landscape pressures, regime logics, and niches/alternatives. Illustrative quotes for key themes are included in the results, a full quote-by-quote breakdown is available upon request.

Table 8: Coding scheme policy analysis

Code group	Codes	Description
Landscape pressures Big, external forces that justify or shape policy responses.	Crisis framing	References to housing crisis, climate crisis, affordability crisis etc.
	Structural challenges	Mentions long-term societal trends including demographic shifts, inequality, financialization, etc.
	Opportunity framing*	References to opportunities, mainly Amsterdam 750 years celebrations as a strategic/symbolic opportunity.
(Socio-political) regime Dominant discourses, institutional norms, and policy tools that reflect the housing regime.	Market-oriented logic	Discourses that emphasizedominant housing logics including commodification, ownership, etc.
	Post-neoliberal logic	References to housing as a right, state intervention/regulation, affordability, etc.
	Policy instruments	Including specific tools: incentives, subsidies, legal frameworks, etc.
	Institutional continuity	Signals of business-as-usual thinking or reliance on existing structures/actors.
Niches & alternatives Discourses that challenge dominant logics by presenting and/or facilitating alternatives.	Supportive framing	Alternatives are framed positively, or their legitimacy is acknowledged.
	Institutionalization	Alternatives are actively facilitated via policy, funding, institutional integration, etc.
	Instrumentalization	Alternatives are mentioned only as temporary, experimental, or symbolic.
	Marginalization	Alternatives are framed as threats, criminalized, or excluded through structural barriers.

**Inductive code derived from empirical data, not predefined by the theoretical framework.*

Step 3 | **Thematic coding**: Each document was uploaded and coded using Atlas.ti. The deductive coding scheme was the leading framework for analysis. The codes were systematically applied to identify recurring patterns, framings, and references to institutional actors or alternatives.

Step 4 | **Memo writing**: For each document, analytical memos were written to summarize key discursive trends, contradictions, and notable insights. This process enabled the synthesis of insights across documents while staying transparent and close to the textual data.

Step 5 | **Results interpretation**: Findings were summarized into categories and patterns that inform the results section of the thesis. This was done based upon the levels from the Multi-Level Perspective (Geels, 2002), guided by critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995). Therefore, special attention was paid to how alternatives were framed, what the dominant logic entailed, and what this reveals about institutional openness to transformation. All policy documents were written in Dutch. For the purpose of this thesis, selected quotes were translated into English. While care was taken to preserve the original meaning, some nuance or context may be lost in translation. Translation was done independently by the researcher to ensure consistency and context-sensitivity.

8.4. Appendix 4

Designing for Porosity: A counterfactual scenario for Hotel Mokum

Goal: The goal of my speculative design exercise is to make the institutional and spatial recommendations that I presented more tangible. It serves as a visual proposition for how Hotel Mokum, and comparable future initiatives, could evolve under a more porous and supportive governance framework. Rather than specifically prescribing the drawn interventions, it offers a counterfactual scenario to imagine how spatial and institutional conditions might enable rather than suppress urban commons. The question that led the design exercise was: *What if Hotel Mokum had not been evicted, but instead been facilitated as a physical site for grass-roots experimentation?*

Conceptual foundation: The design concept builds on the research results and theoretical concepts of prefigurative planning, institutional prefiguration, and porosity. The concept of prefigurative planning (Davoudi, 2023) inspires this vision by emphasizing the importance of facilitating future visions in the here and now, both through spatial and institutional practice. This aligns with Hotel Mokum as a lived experiment in collective housing and urban commons. To envision how such a space could have been supported, the design draws on the idea of institutional prefiguration (Lawford & Sareen, 2025). This concept refers to creating participatory and flexible arrangements that allow informal initiatives to gradually interact with formal governance structures without being fully absorbed or co-opted. Following Lawford & Sareen (2025), this would turn Hotel Mokum into a 'space of orchestration', where new institutional relations can be tested and negotiated over time. The spatial and institutional logic of the design is rooted in the concept of porosity, particularly as discussed by Boer (2023), contrasting it to the 'smooth city'. Where dominant planning models prioritize efficiency and 'smoothness', a porous city embraces friction and intentional incompleteness. This design concept visualizes what a porous governance and design framework might look like in practice.

Method and inspiration: Beyond theory, the design was informed by the research results. The book Pak Mokum Terug (Mokum Kraakt, 2023) and the documentary Hotel Mokum (Meijman, 2023) gave insights into the ideas the collective had with the building. Additional insights were adapted from the interviews, specifically from the building tours I had during some interviews. These gave insights into what collective and experimental living could look like in practice. Finally, inspiration was drawn from international examples, both temporary and permanent. These included, for example, an occupied building turned into an urban commons in Rome (Di Feliciantonio, 2017) and a temporarily occupied building in London (Milligan, 2023). To visualize the insights, I decided to use a conceptual sectional axonometric. This was not intended as an actual building plan but as a layered representation of potential spatial dynamics. By including handwritten symbols, it draws on inspiration from activist mapping and architectural sketches, fitting in the prefigurative look and feel. This method reflects speculative design practices. Rather than proposing a solution, the visual invites reimagining housing and urban governance.

Explanation of visuals: The counterfactual scenario consists of three intersected visuals:

- The timeline at the left outlines five speculative institutional phases, ranging from occupation to transformation. This timeline is used to illustrate how institutional support could evolve over time to balance questions of continuity with the desire to operate relatively autonomously.
- Second, the sectional axonometric in the middle shows a layered building interior. This is used to visualize the outcomes of this research across the five housing domains. It shows what reimagining the redevelopment of a vacant building could look like.
- Finally, the recommendations on the right are used to connect the visual back to the presented recommendations and illustrate what these might look like in practice.

Conclusion: The design component serves as a visual extension of the thesis arguments. While the visual might indicate a spatial design, it is fundamentally a speculative design proposal. It suggests how urban governance could be reimagined to support grassroots housing alternatives like Hotel Mokum. Although such transformation may not necessarily occur within (illegally) occupied buildings, this concept does provide insights into what becomes possible when regimes are more porous.