

Camelot is using people in need of housing as 'realestate pawns' and as 'out-sourced dwellers' that only serve to facilitate speculation

Camelot Europe is an international vacant property management company, that started in the Netherlands. Their business is vacant property management services to provide realestate clients with a 'cost effective, high quality and flexible solution' to protect vacant properties against vandalism and such. Camelot provides these services in the UK, Ireland, Scotland, France, the Netherlands, Germany and Belgium and is now attending Mipim 2014.

Its 'services' to the realestate sector are in fact a way to maximise profit from vacant properties by exploiting people in need of a house. Camelot was one of the first Dutch 'antisquat' companies that came up with the idea of having people in need of housing live in empty buildings as 'property protectors' on temporary flex-contracts and without any tenants rights. These dwellers can be kicked out of their house on a two weeks notice, are deprived of privacy as Camelot will randomly inspect their premises to see if they 'behave properly', and are forced to agree to a set of conditions that constrain their freedom of behavior and mobility.

As a result Camelot is currently housing thousands of people throughout Europe, without assuming the slightest responsibility that a landlord should bear. It is exclusively housing people for profit, not for people or the right to housing.

There are many more vacant property protection companies in Europe and beyond that operate like this. But since Camelot is assuming a position as 'marketleader' and has certain specific activities and characteristics, our accusation is directed at Camelot and as follows:

- Camelot is using the shortage of affordable housing by offering people in need of a house a temporary place provided they give up their (tenants) rights.
- Camelot is by-passing legislation regarding the protection of tenants. In doing so it is creating a group of second-rate tenants.
- Camelot is using inhabitants as 'realestate pawns' and as 'out-sourced dwellers' that only serve to facilitate speculation by protecting vacant property and to facilitate the break down and the privatization of the social housing sector.
- Camelot is jointly responsible for the realestate bubble by enabling realestate speculators returns on their vacant property; returns that are produced by exploited people in need of housing. Because of this, speculators don't devaluate their property and property values remain artificially high, which makes building new properties profitable. As a result, natural areas and public spaces continue to be sacrificed for new (office) buildings, that have no demand from companies or citizens; new buildings that only serve to empty out older buildings in the area. With its vacant property protection, Camelot helps this vicious circle to remain unbroken.
- Camelot subordinates the right to housing to the profitability of realestate and is with its services and marketing actively contributing to acceptance of this mindset in Dutch society.
- Camelot discriminates in the acces to housing, intimidates inhabitants and treats them with arbitrariness.
- Camelot allows people to live in bad housing conditions, doesn't invest in maintenance of dwellings or improving the quality of the housing conditions for the inhabitants.

- Camelot defiles the privacy of inhabitants and imposes them with other far reaching constrains of their freedom of behavior and mobility. In fact Camelot defiles over 50 different clauses of several laws and (international) conventions concerning tenants and human rights.
- In spite of its claim otherwise, Camelot is not contributing to solving the shortage in housing, as it is not investing in (realizing) permanent affordable rental housing. Camelot also places people in (vacant) social rental housing, but never re-invest its returns from that in social rental housing.
- Camelot is misleading the public by presenting its vacant property protection service as a solution for the shortage of housing. It's misleading because its so called 'corporate social responsibility' is in fact the exploitation of people in need of housing.
- Camelot is an active lobbyist with local, regional and national governments and social housing corporations. It is actively promoting 'flexible housing without (tenant) rights'. Camelot does this in several European countries and is advising lawmakers and politicians how to make 'housing without (tenant) rights' possible, if it isn't yet. Camelot introduced such legislation for example in France, where it was named the Camelot-Act.
- With ist activities, Camelot is one of the driving forces behind the increasing precarisation of housing in the Netherlands and other European countries.

Further backgrounds on the accusation of Camelot:

The Bond Precaire Woonvormen (BPW), a Union of people who's housing situation is precarious, is a collective of volunteers who demand a halt to the rapid increase of temporary renting contracts and who support tenants who are in this precarious situation, often threatened with eviction.

The Netherlands has a broad social rental sector which is currently under heavy attack by different dynamics: The social housing corporations got entangled in a leak to the capital market, the government executes neoliberal policies promoting privatisation, home-ownership and high rent increases. It is actually currently paving way for a massive sell off of the social rental housing sector. The social housing sector is now being taxed to pay for the debts of the (realestate) crisis caused by the neoliberal ideology promoting home-ownership. Huge private debts were transferred into public debts as banks were bailed out by the state. But the speculative housing bubbles and fake economic growth we saw last decades are 'natural' results of the logic of capitalism and reason for todays austerity measures. These systematic problems are now resulting in roaming off the social housing sector, less capacity to invest and build social rental housing and are actively attacking social housing as a public and humane achievement.

In these dynamics people are increasingly forced to accept temporary rental contracts without any tenants rights. The BPW is acting and organising against this growing tendency of precarisation of housing, the antisquat model and other precarious forms of housing.

There is a shortage of affordable housing in the Netherlands. For that reason, people are increasingly forced to accept temporary rental contracts without any tenants rights. There is a thick

package of tenants rights in the Netherlands that is compiled of several laws. Now, 'vacant property protectors', commercial companies like Camelot, that were born from the interests of real estate, have found a way to by-pass all tenants rights completely.

They let often young people or others with little money and an urgent need for housing, live in vacant properties to 'protect' those properties (from vandalism and such) by keeping them occupied. The occupants can be kicked out of these houses within two weeks. And they are forced to give up their privacyrights (article 8 of the European Convention on Human rights), as the company will randomly inspect their premises to see if they 'behave properly'.

The surpassing of tenant rights is done by using 'on loan'-contracts which are private law, instead of civil law. These on loan-contracts are full of conditions that benefit the home-owners and the company, but not the inhabitant. For example: an inhabitant cannot have pets, cannot receive their family for dinner with Christmas, cannot have children, cannot leave dishes in the kitchen, cannot get in touch with the owner of the building or sometimes even with the press. On top of that, the inhabitants are intimidated with serious fines or threatened with eviction if they don't abide these rules. The contract can be ended at all times within two to four weeks without providing any reason and without the inhabitant having a right to substitute housing or moving costs. In Dutch law, these rights are included in normal rent situations.

At the same time the inhabitants often pay a monthly fee of somewhere in between € 150,- and € 400,- as well as their own energy and water bills. This is, by Dutch law, considered a situation of rent, and thus Rent law applies. Still inhabitants are usually afraid to challenge companies like Camelot in court, because of the fines and the high costs of courtcases in general. It's not only students anymore that live like this. More and more lower income people in general who need a house urgently, are forced to accept these temporary rental contracts without any tenants rights.

But why do people live like this and in increasing numbers? One of the reasons is that there are huge quantities of vacant properties. In the Netherlands there is momentarily 40 million (miljoen) square meters of vacant realestate, including houses, offices, hospitals and shops. 16% Of all officebuildings is empty which is almost 8 million square meters, after Greece the highest rate of vacant offices in Europe. And 8% of all shops are empty.

Another reason is that the vacant property protecting companies like Camelot introduced 'antisquat' as a 'new' ('lifestyle') way of living, 'flexible and adventurous' in 'crazy places' like vacant castles of vacant fun fares. They made it look attractive to many people.

More importantly the antisquatcompanies, and especially Camelot, have a strong lobby and big marketingbudgets. They invest a lot in lobbying (local) government officials. The Dutch law 'Wet kraken en Leegstand' (Law that prohibits squatting and vacancy) for example has given a tremendous boost to the antisquat companies in the Netherlands, with them offering their services to municipalities and housingcorporations, who all of sudden – because of the new law – had 'do something about vacancy in our municipality' on their to-do-list. Another example is in France, where Camelot helped to introduce a law that made temporary living in vacant buildings possible. That law was named after Camelot.

It is also due to a lack of counter information from social movements (the Dutch tenant unions failed to prioritise this problem) about the precarisation of housing, that the government is just following these market driven tendencies with policies that allow the ongoing precarisation.

In the Netherlands there are an estimated 50 antisquat / vacant property protection companies active: Camelot (currently one of the fastest growing companies from the Netherlands), Interveste, AdHoc, HOD, Bezet, AK-Beheer, Alvast, Anna vastgoed, Bewaakt en bewoond, De vastgoedbeschermer, de Kabath, FMT, Interim, Livable, SLAK, VVB wonen, Villex, Voorkom Leegstand, Zwerfkei. FMT, AK beheer (was Antikraak BV) and NAK were recently bought by VPSitex, which is owned by funds that are maintained by TDR Capital, a British 'highly selective

private equity firm'. Vacant property protection is lucrative business, since it is making use of housing for profit only.

Different temporary rent contracts

But of course a most important reason for the growth of antisquat is the shortage in housing. Ironically enough Dutch housing policy is responding to this housing shortage by pursuing even further deregulation of the conditions under which temporary rent is permitted. The traditional Dutch renting contract is permanent (i.e. time-unlimited) but in recent years the number of temporary renting contracts has increased considerably. There are many different forms of contracts now: Campuscontracts (students); Youth contracts; Short stay (expats); Temporary rent under the Vacancylaw (which was expanded per 1 juli 2013 to 7 en 10 years and liberalised rents); contract for a fixed period (Huurovereenkomst voor bepaalde tijd / locatie en tijdgebonden contracten); contract of 'in nature short term' ('naar zijn aard van korte duur' used often to by-pass the Vacancylaw); Antisquat; On loan.

The urge for new forms of temporary contracts is still imperative and lobbyists, companies and politicians are advocating for it more and more, especially in the large cities. These 'flexcontracts' are often placed after each other, pushing aside the permanent (time-unlimited) renting contracts. Nowadays, it's almost impossible for a person to know about all these dynamics and only specialists can know what their rights are in this jungle. This confusion leads to conformation and passivity in Dutch society on this subject. As a result an increasing diversity of people live outside of the social system of rent protection and social housing. Whereas in fact these people usually qualify for social housing. Politics is hardly interested in this and masque the conflict behind it. They are happy to leaving difficulties to the courts to decide when things get rough.

Some general demands of the BPW

The BPW considers the precarisation of housing as a transfer of risk to citizens, with corresponding negative effects on the lives of those involved. De BPW supports people who are in precarious housing situations in various ways (amongst them is legal advise, organising, media, demonstrations). We try to create political (on national and local level) pressure for demands such as:

- Stop hollowing out tenant rights / a halt to the rapid increase of temporary renting contracts;
- Stop the break down of the social housing sector;
- Social housing corporations should stop making use of 'middle men' (these are the 'vacant property protection' companies like Camelot) to exploit their vacant houses. Instead, they should fix the houses and rent them out for affordable rents.
- Punish abuse of flexcontracts.
- Affordable rental housing as a collective right / give people rental contracts with real rights instead of temporary contracts that serve only the interests and profitability of real estate.

In line with this, the BPW is fully supporting the demands of the European Action Coalition for the Right to Housing and the City.