

# Het Fort van Sjakoo

## Amsterdam's Lasting Beacon of Anarchist Spirit and Community Resistance

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The squat was there first, then came the bookshop. *Het Fort van Sjakoo* is located in the centre of Amsterdam for nearly 50 years already, squatted in 1975 as part of a protest against the city's plans for a new hotel, and developing into a bookshop in 1977 as part of a larger social struggle against the city rebuilding. You can still see the marks this squat left woven into the landscape of the city with narrow streets remaining untouched and no hotel in sight where *het Fort van Sjakoo* stands, with The Pillared Turtle by Hans 't Mannetje, a statue of a column-bearing turtle as a boundary between different visions in the Nieuwmarkt neighbourhood. It indicates where an unfinished highway ends. The plinth on Jodenbreestraat reads: *until here the old city pattern disappeared / from here the urban renewal began in this neighbourhood*

*/ In memory of this, in 1986 this memorial was erected. Everything around the bookshop, except for the Rembrandt house, is new.*



Begun as a success story against the demolishing of the old, this small bookshop still stands strong in its place, now legally owned by the volunteer collective running it. This was the culmination of a lengthy journey which included getting a rental contract in the 1980s from the housing corporation the space belonged to (owned in turn by the Dutch government) which led to a rent increase in the beginning of the 2000s due to the privatisation of the corporation as well as the fact that the area was slowly becoming less rough and more touristy. The rent increase was protested in an anarchist fashion authentic to the bookshop's roots: public disturbance, occupying of buildings, accompanied by petitions and demonstrations, almost leading up to a court case. Thanks to public fundraising and local support, the bookshop was bought out without the help of a bank loan, allowing its ethos to prevail in choosing relevant and

interesting books without focusing on commercial market demands, functioning therefore as a small shimmering beacon of anti-consumerism in the heart of Amsterdam.

A lot of it works thanks to the collective of volunteers running the place, some of them having been there for 20-30 years. With some of the older members having been involved in Amsterdam's squatters' movement themselves, it is truly *het Fort van Sjakoo's* core and carries a relevance to this day. The housing crisis in the Netherlands is one of the worst in Europe and squatting isn't possible the way it used to be, with active laws now existing against it. While at one point in the 1980s it was the most common way to get housing, it is now extremely difficult to land even social housing, with most of the population struggling with ever-increasing rent costs and precarious contracts mostly in favour of the landlord. According to the bookshop's team itself, there is a need to think about different ways of organising and it wants to give people the tools to do that. You can find the newest edition of *The Squatter's Handbook* on the shelves of *het Fort van Sjakoo*, alongside a wide range of other activist literature. With the anarchist section being the biggest in the Netherlands - you can find anything from Mikhail Bakunin to Emma Goldman - *het Fort van Sjakoo* keeps up to date with the turmoil in the world, whether it's Black Lives Matter, Extinction Rebellion, anti-fascism, feminist & queer studies, or national discussions about Dutch colonial past.



The bookshop works in synergy with the local community which is key in understanding the heart of this establishment. While the volunteers' collective meets every two weeks to discuss the daily goings-on as well as potential new orders, *het Fort van Sjakoo* is a servant of the people - if you come in looking for a book, they will do their best to find it for you even if they don't have it in stock. It follows the organic flow of things in curating their selection as well as co-operation with publishers: while offering a variety of books from bigger publishers, like Verso, they strive to represent smaller independent material that is harder to access as well, with book fairs - such as the Anarchist book fair - playing an important role in that. In a transindividual spirit where the human being is viewed as an open and social process, a whirlwind of participation and co-creation of society, it is not just about selling books - it's about community, a slippery notion in today's world of hyperindividualism. It

works vice versa, with certain institutions placing regular orders of books from *het Fort van Sjakoo* as a way of supporting them. In addition, they also curate book selections for art institutions, such as Framer Framed, a platform for contemporary art, visual culture, and critical theory and practice which presents exhibitions alongside diverse cultural and educational programs at its main location in Amsterdam Oost, and is also focused on offering resources for local and transnational communities, artists, and curators to turn their ideas into tangible realities.



*Het Fort van Sjakoo* also has a dizzyingly substantial collection of second-hand literature in the midst of which they sometimes get lost themselves. The second-hand shelves are available for rummaging through only on site, but a large part of their selection is accessible on their website which was established during Covid-19, partly as a means of survival (and successfully, so). Digitalisation is one way of keeping with the times, with another reflected in the magazine section of the shop where you can now flip through brochures and zines as opposed to newspapers like they used to sell. Through a collective effort, the bookshop has gone through a long process from a physical catalogue to an online database, making sure it stays firmly ingrained on the landscape of Amsterdam. *Het Fort van Sjakoo* is one of the only

bookshops left in the Netherlands with a unique collectivist approach and anarchist vision of the world. With its impressive history and current management based on communal energy and joint effort, it carries invaluable worth in today's world as one of the literary pillars of Amsterdam.

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