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The Dutch Neoliberal City and the Cultural Activist as the Last of the Idealists

BAVO

A Top European Location and a Breeding Ground for New Art Forms

Amsterdam-Zuidas is a new urban development in Amsterdam entirely targeted at international top players. This is made clear by the brochures in which the words ‘top’ and ‘international’ come up again and again. One could see the Zuidas development as a playground for the new European elite of managers, lawyers, consultants and advertising agencies. It is a combination of ‘top of the range’ office buildings, luxury apartments, green and sports facilities and even its own design museum and theatre complex. Underneath this top district, an immense transport hub will be constructed, guaranteeing its connection to such transport links as the A 10 motorway, the metro and the Dutch Railways and HSL high-speed rail networks. This will immediately make the Amsterdam-Zuidas station the fifth-largest in the Netherlands.1

It might seem surprising that the construction of a city district with such a one-dimensional composition is possible at a time when large sections of Dutch cities are being turned upside-down in a veritable crusade against a unilateral socio-economic profile. Whereas poor neighbourhoods are having strict distribution schemes imposed on them in order to create a ‘good mix’ – and thus a housing differentiation is being organized by stimulating the influx of middle and higher incomes – the Zuidas will no doubt become the most monolithic neighbourhood in the Netherlands. The Zuidas is an enclave within Amsterdam, entirely intended for the top segment of society. It is therefore difficult not to conclude that some urban planning rules and arguments clearly do not apply for the higher strata of society, and that in the area of urban development, a double standard is being applied.2

It has become a tradition in the Netherlands, for integral urban developments, to include the cultural and/or culture-historical dimension in an early stage of the planning process.3 This is also the case for the Zuidas development. In this instance, the Zuidas Project Bureau has invited cultural actors to actively participate in the conceptualization of the development of an artistic climate in the area. As the Zuidas Project Bureau formulated it ‘ … we want an inspirational and lively artistic climate in the Zuidas. When you say “Zuidas” a few years from now, we want people to think of art.’4 This has led, among other things, to the 2003 founding of the Virtual Museum Zuidas, a foundation consisting of prominent figures in the Dutch cultural world.5 Their ambitions include turning the Zuidas into ‘a kind of museum’, ‘a place within which new art forms can be created’.6 This foundation has launched various initiatives, including a plan for a design museum and arts centre as well as a programme aimed at safeguarding the integral, architectural qualities of the area.

The overly optimistic, constructive institution of the Virtual Museum is not the only response of cultural actors to the open invitation of the Zuidas Project Bureau. The obscene, elitist character of the Zuidas development has also re-ignited the ‘good old’ debate about the social role of art and culture. Some intuitively sense the

questionable nature of the new alliance between capital and culture, between the real estate sector and art, and bluntly assert that cultural actors should keep far away from involvement with such dubious societal players and practices. Think for instance of Hinrich Sachs, who recently argued that artists 'should not want to play any role' in urban project developments like the Zuidas.7 Others, like the Logo Parc initiative, instead take up the challenge of finding out how art can undermine such urban developments from the inside out. There is an effort to find, in other words, ways for artists to accept the invitation to take part while preserving their critical position or autonomy.8

This essay sides with the second group when it comes to ambition, but with the first when it comes to scepticism. It argues that cultural forces must fully accept the mandate they have been given, and take the attendant symbolic and financial power as well as the room for negotiation extremely seriously. If culture today is increasingly 'internalized' by government authorities, project developers and investors as a factor that can determine the success of a development – and for this reason is asked 'to play a role in the process' – then it must fully endorse this and pursue its cultural agenda with a determination and consistency the other parties often have not intended.

A crucial element of this internal resistance is a proper insight into the forces cultural actors have to deal with, as well as the nature and logic of the planning process in which art is asked to participate. The first and longest section of this essay, indeed, consists of an analysis of the political-economic and ideological processes behind urban-design developments like the Zuidas. From this analysis, a counter-strategy is outlined. To the cultural actors who want to keep far away from such developments, and dismiss them as discussions external to artistic practice, we can only say that those who do not first work through the determinative conditions of their own production lose the right to pontificate about cultural engagement. In such a case, the sempiternal complaints about the misuse of art as the 'wallpaper' of economic development whereby the critical intentions of the artistic sector are continually neutralized – are merely an empty gesture.

Neoliberal Planning…

An oft-heard justification for the development of Amsterdam-Zuidas is that this kind of monolithic, antisocial urban development is the logical consequence of a situation in which the real estate sector and financial capital have been given free rein. This is supposedly the result of the rapid dismantling and retrenching of the Dutch state in the wake of the Purple Coalition debacle in the nineteennineties – manifested in the area of spatial planning by the abandonment of 'bloated' government planning. In short, the unabashed development of the Zuidas into a new work and residential ghetto for the top segment of society is supposedly a symptom of the unstoppable rise of a neoliberal policy based on the laissez faire laissez passez principle or, what amounts to the same thing, the idea that 'the market regulates itself'.

Nothing could be further from the truth. The government authorities involved – in this case the city of Amsterdam and the Dutch state are two of the most passionate promoters and champions of Amsterdam-Zuidas!9 The development not only fits in perfectly with Amsterdam's efforts over many years to establish itself as a top international city – think for instance of the recent 'Amsterdam Topstad' campaign10 – it is also, for the state, one of six 'key projects' intended to put the Netherlands on the international map.11 What's more, Zuidas-Amsterdam is the largest of these key projects, involving a state investment of 653 million Euro.

How can we explain this fusion of a retrenching government with a hyperactive role – often as client, investor, entrepreneur and customer all at the same time? Of course, the thesis of this 'retrenching government' has not been made up out of thin air. As in business, it is fashionable these days, at various government levels, to sharply redefine the 'core business'. Instead of trying to be good at everything, government institutions too are being guided by the idea that investments should be strictly limited to sectors and/or activities that contribute to the top position of a city, region or country. Anything that does not meet this criterion must be inexorably passed off to lower levels of government or put on the back burner. The fact that the government is now copying

the health norms of business is in itself a telling characteristic of the rise of neoliberal ideology in more and more spheres of society.

The results of this ‘business revision’ by the state can be read in the recent Nota Ruimte (the Dutch government report on spatial planning), with the suggestive subtitle Ruimte voor ontwikkeling (‘space for development’). In it, without a shred of embarrassment, it is argued that the national government, in the area of spatial planning, should only concern itself with what it calls the ‘Main Spatial Structure’. This refers to the most important ‘assets’ of the Netherlands, the economic magnets, the sectors in which the Netherlands can compete on a global scale. Think of the Port of Rotterdam and of Schiphol Airport, but also, in the future, of the Zuidas. The state sees its core task primarily in the intensive (economic) development, possibly in consultation with the relevant partners, of these ‘mainports’. The rest of its former jurisdictions are being devolved to lower levels of government – the cities, regions, provinces – or to the market. Along with its intensive involvement in the Main Spatial Structure, it is still committed to the monitoring of basic spatial quality. This entails a number of minimum standards or floors for such basic concerns as security, water management or the environment.

The active role of this retrenched government should not be underestimated and is evidenced by the frequently raging debates waged in its wake. The focus is always which projects deserve the label of ‘national importance’ and therefore can be assured of sorely needed state funding. In early 2006, for instance, when the distribution of FES (Economic Structural Reinforcement Fund) surpluses was discussed, there was a great deal of controversy about the Zuiderzee train link to the north of the country. In the television programme Nova, this link was scrapped from the list of issues of top economic importance by Professor Albert Pols – to the great displeasure of the united northern provinces.12 Even the superficial theorizing about the ‘competitive position of CBDs’ (central business districts) by someone like Pieter Tordoir has to be seen in this context: it is nothing less than an attempt to underscore the international relevance of the Zuidas and to elevate it to a national issue.13

So when this retrenching government is brought up, we have to be very precise. Rather than a total eclipse – the ‘death of planning’ critics are so fond of proclaiming – we are witnessing a selective retrenchment. Even as it is ‘outsourcing’ or divesting itself of certain sets of tasks and responsibilities, it is strengthening its role in relation to other matters. In short, while the government, in relation to certain areas and sectors, is planning from the top down more than ever before, it is doing so with a specific agenda: to shore up the international competitive position of the Netherlands. The Amsterdam-Zuidas project is clearly part of this ambition.14 In the Nota Ruimte, the state justifies its commitment to the Zuidas in terms of increasing the diversity and economic foundation of the ‘Noordvleugel’ (the ‘North Wing’ of the Randstad, the urban conglomeration in the west of the Netherlands, which includes Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Utrecht and the Hague) – one of the key economic areas of the Netherlands and, as such, part of the Main Spatial Structure. It sees this as an element of providing top-flight metropolitan business locations around Schiphol Airport, especially for international operating corporations. In this, the state aims to fulfil the demands of multinationals in terms of agglomeration advantages, logistics, knowledge institutions and manpower.15

The Zuidas development is thus the showcase for ‘urban planning in the era of neoliberalism’: a spatial planning policy that operates according to the ethos of the market and has fully adopted its objectives. In this the government has not only reformed itself according to the norms that operate in business, it has also made the ambitions of the market – creating competitive advantages, exploiting ‘strong sectors’, outdoing the competition, etc. – its own. It is clear, in any event, that socially motivated spatial planning objectives have been purged from its set of tasks and transferred either to lower administrative levels or to the market. From this we can only conclude that the institution and safeguarding of spatial planning equitability is no longer seen as an essential cornerstone of good national spatial planning policy.16

… and its Democratic Face

This neoliberal sea change in spatial planning policy is naturally not publicized as such by the government – or

at least not exclusively so. Planning ‘according to market standards’ is sold as a great step forward in the democratization of spatial planning desired by all of society. In the Nota Ruimte, for example, under the heading ‘Government Management Philosophy’, we can read that the government humbly admits having neither the wisdom nor the solutions for the countless spatial planning controversies, and that it primarily wants to ensure that others, better suited to this task, can shoulder their responsibilities17 In this regard it openly admits that in the past it has too often meddled unnecessarily in local issues and in so doing ignored democratic decision making.18

Presenting its recent, neoliberal make-over as its contribution to the popular ideal of an entrepreneurial society in which market partners in consultation with social partners are given the chance to organize their own habitat is undoubtedly strategically motivated. Through the mobilization of all kinds of societal forces – encouraged to take advantage of the opportunities presented by a city or region – the government is securing a broad base of support. Winning this support would be far more difficult if it were done in the name of a hard-nosed economic agenda, or the outsourcing of its social responsibilities. As always with ideological justifications, and certainly when ‘democracy’ is trotted out, we have to be extremely alert and ask ourselves just what these opportunities are, as well as for whom these opportunities are intended.

To start with the first (‘what are these opportunities?’) we can refer to the observation of social geographer Erik Swyngedouw on the role of the government within the neoliberal development of the Zuidas. He argues that ‘ … contrary to what its ideology holds dear, conservative liberalism has always maintained a very unique and intimate relationship with state intervention … Planners and local authorities adopt a more proactive and entrepreneurial approach aimed at identifying market opportunities and urging private investors to exploit them.’19 In short, when the government talks about creating and taking advantage of opportunities, it primarily means economic opportunities. Viewed from this perspective, democracy fits perfectly, of course, in its neoliberal agenda.

From the necessity of this proactive attitude, we can deduce, in any event, that the ideal of an entrepreneurial, democratic city is anything but problem-free. Why, after all, should the government have to stimulate its partners to ‘take advantage of opportunities’, if it were not for the fact that the city is not as naturally entrepreneurial as is usually presumed? Or at least not as enterprising in the sense meant by the powers that be: in terms of the economic exploitation of niches. Before the city can live up to its expectations as an entrepreneurial city, it must therefore first – not to say constantly – be encouraged to take up this specific sort of entrepreneurial practices. This even applies to market players. It is a rule of spatial economics, for instance, that market players have a tendency to ‘under-invest’ in facilities in which other parties, be they private or public, might derive an advantage. Think of road infrastructure, public space, schools or research institutions. Government authorities have to expend an unusually large amount of energy to get market players to dig into their own pockets to invest in this so-called ‘grey area’. The burden of proof is more often than not placed on the government authorities, who have to prove to their partners that certain investments will generate significant returns, as well as provide guarantees to that effect, such as a sizable preliminary investment as well as the shouldering of potential financial risk.20

In regard to the second question (‘opportunities, for whom?’) it does not take much to see that, while there is of course a formal equality, certain opportunities – and here we are primarily speaking of the opportunities that actually matter, such as the implementation of a project like Amsterdam-Zuidas – can only be exploited if one has the financial as well as knowledge capital needed to carry out the exploitation. The fact that everyone has an equal right to claim the democratic playing field, to shape the city, and so on, therefore does not mean that everyone possesses the means to do so. It is clear that large real estate corporations can enjoy a vastly disproportionate portion of the democratic right to ‘take advantage of opportunities’. In short, we encounter here one of the most cunning tricks of the neoliberal ideology of the entrepreneurial city: the presentation of individuals and businesses as equivalent entities. The two are seen as equally autonomous forces that, in

satisfying their own desires and interests, make creative use of the ‘opportunities’ contained in the urban arena.

Aside from the issue of unequal means, the problem is also that citizens, unlike businesses, often do not necessarily have an entrepreneurial or exploitative relationship with their city. It is this non-economic relationship driven by different values: ecological, moral, even political – that is not tolerated within the neoliberal form of urban development. In the latter, all stakeholders (including the government) are reduced to ‘merely’ one of the discussion partners who must be prepared to negotiate their desires in a transparent, economic negotiating process. A protectionist government policy in favour of vulnerable sections of society – which, driven by democratic ideals, offers them certain privileges in the negotiations – is of course entirely out of the question. Within the negotiation process, the only idealism allowed is the calculation of mutual interests. What is denied here is, again, the unequal balance of power – or sometimes even the relationship of dependence – that exists among the various discussion partners at the negotiating table.

Is the government then not allowed to adjust the course of this process of negotiation at all? It does, but then only in the choices made by the social forces to the extent that these can have a positive spin-off for the economy, or if the competitiveness of the latter comes into play. Here we face a paradoxical situation in which it is the very spatial planning policy based on the radically democratic character of the urban production process that is constantly active in ensuring that the urban players use their democratic rights properly, or use them at all. In this the national government is copying the (neoliberal) definition of democracy as propagated by the United States for decades: democracy as the right of free choice, which you are guaranteed as long as you make the right choices. Or to put it another way, the arena of forces is given the chance to play a part in shaping the city on the condition that it do so as an entrepreneur and cause no damage to the urban economy.

All this lends nuance, of course, to the popular thesis of the end of the ‘malleable’ society, city or even human being. The new, market-driven operations of the government also demand a massive change in thinking on the part of the social partners. With the retrenchment of the government – however selective – these partners have to shoulder a lot more responsibilities and take the initiative in the economic arena. All this being said, the role of the policy maker remains fairly traditional in this regard. The government takes on the role of the prophet of the new reality of a creative, self-entrepreneurial city and works tirelessly to educate the social partners to act accordingly. Urban policy makers are thus busy pointing out ‘opportunities’ to the market players, urging social partners to communicate their desires and getting them to the point of starting to develop certain areas of the city. In this way, under the guise of development planning and in the name of the public good, spatial planning policy makers are preparing the urban area for its colonization by the market.21

After ‘Red for Green’, Now ‘Red for Culture’ too

Although all of this might seem of little concern to many cultural actors, this is nevertheless the dubious framework within which artists, designers and architects today – in initiatives such as the Dutch government’s Space & Culture Action Programme – are invited to contribute to the development of the city.22 From an early stage of important project developments, they are asked to join the coalition of government authorities and project developers. The cultural legion is not only asked to shoulder its responsibility as keeper of the aesthetic and symbolic quality of the public space, but also to take advantage of the apparently unique opportunity to make its mark, at an early stage, on a future piece of central urban domain. In short, whether they like it or not, cultural forces are immersed up to their neck in the neoliberal planning processes with a democratic face described above. And, we argue, the further artists wish to keep away from such processes, the greater their complicity in them. This is particularly true of the cultural actors that are active within Amsterdam-Zuidas.

The central question is thus how we should interpret this alliance between culture and big business. How, for instance, to explain the privileged position of the cultural actors within a development like the Zuidas, which after all primarily serves the interests of the real estate sector? How to explain that, of all the social partners, government authorities count on the cultural forces to democratize the city? This seems to indicate that cultural

forces are seen as ideal allies in the neoliberal planning process. Furthermore, the question also arises whether the cultural forces are capable of making a development like Amsterdam-Zuidas – which in reality is a vulgar marketing strategy, tarted up with a democratic flavouring – transcend itself? Should they want this at all? And if so, how can cultural actors bring this about?
Let us begin with the first cluster of questions, relating to the new alliance between government authorities, market partners and cultural actors. This alliance can seem unconventional or even progressive. Where else in the world do artists get a chance to exchange ideas with property magnates about a brand new city centre? This seems already less so when we assess it against the backdrop of the current tendency to present culture or cultural history as an indispensable asset for a strong city or region. Aside from creating a so-called creative city, it is also considered crucial for creating an attractive location climate for multinational corporations. The most often cited justification for this is that the employees of (international) companies, because of their high levels of education, set particularly high standards for their living environment. Factors such as spatial quality, a diversity of cultural venues, a rich history, a tolerant social climate, etc., are deciding factors in convincing this elite to commit to a city.

This ‘promotion’ of culture must be situated against the age-old process of internalization by the market – as well as by its political appendage – of what are called ‘externalities’. In the last several decades, it was primarily the environment that was in the spotlight as an essential externality of capitalism. A broadly supported social movement decried the fact that although the environment was one of the determinative conditions of the economy – as a reservoir of resources, as a dumping ground for its waste, as a habitat for its workers, and so forth – the market pays nothing for it. What’s more, the negative effects of this exploitation – pollution, depletion, loss of quality of life – often have to be borne by local communities or the state. After years of struggle by green movements in particular, this externality is now increasingly internalized. Businesses are being required to pay for their use of nature, or to invest in its regeneration or clean-up. Environmental impact is now fully accounted for in the costs of project developments as well. Think, for instance, of the ‘red for green’ arrangement – heavily promoted by the Dutch government – whereby the maintenance or creation of green space is funded by linking it to so-called red functions such as housing, commercial estates and traffic infrastructure.23

In fact, culture or cultural history – think of the recent hype about cultural planning – is undergoing the same fate as the environment: it too is being fully adopted as a necessary determinative condition in spatial developments. For years it was considered a nice extra – when it was considered at all. Today, on the contrary, the presence of a rich cultural history or a fertile cultural climate, for the reasons outlined above, is seen as an indispensable added value for the success of a spatial planning development. The market and the government in fact attempt to integrate this explicitly in the city’s planning. It is in this light that we must understand the ambition of the Zuidas Project Bureau to excel both in the area of popular culture venues – by using popular theatre guru Joop van den Ende as an ambassador and standard-bearer of the development – as well as in the more difficult quest for ‘new art forms’ – a commission laid at the door of the Virtual Museum Zuidas.

Whether cultural forces should be happy with its internalization as a market factor apart from the issue of whether it is at all possible to plan anything as fragile and obscure as a ‘fertile cultural climate’ – remains very much to be seen. In the first place, it reduces their specific activity to the object of a market deal and therefore to a form of capital: that is, cultural capital. Analogous to the ‘red for green’ arrangements, the economic colonization of the last ‘uncapitalized’ spaces in the city is exchanged or traded for generous compensations to the cultural sector, so that we can rightly speak of a ‘red for culture’ arrangement. The hand being extended to the cultural sector is also clearly motivated by a fear that if the Zuidas development is left entirely up to the government and the real estate sector – if the Zuidas Project Bureau leaves it up to itself, in other words – it will remain deprived of the exciting malfunctions and frictions that are so essential today in seducing the highly demanding, internationally operating high-income earner. Philosopher Slavoj Zizek once described the latter as a yuppie who has his financial affairs well in order, but who still cultivates an alternative, anti-capitalist aura.24

A project development exclusively targeted to these groups cannot avoid incorporating this aura in its plans. The Zuidas Project Bureau clearly believes that no one can better stimulate such an image than the cultural actors. These cultural actors are subsequently expected to dress up an intrinsically capitalist development in an anti-capitalist, 'critical' package.

The Cultural Sector as the Only Hope for Amsterdam-Zuidas?

The transfer of tasks to the cultural forces, however, goes much further than the demand to produce an elusive urban quality so crucial to the success of urban developments. We can also see this invitation extended to the cultural sector to 'jump into the process' as a solution to the crisis of legitimacy looming for a spatial planning that has been reduced to mere project development – with government authorities increasingly running their cities like a business. For what is left, within such an outlook, of their political task, their role as defender of the public interest? The answer, of course, is precious little. Spatial planning policy has today regressed into facilitating the interests of private real estate groups and investors or the outlining of a global strategy for fierce competition with other, often neighbouring cities.

The prominent position accorded to culture within neoliberal planning must be understood as a compensation for the political sector giving up its political task. We can see this as an example of what is known in psychoanalysis as 'transference'.25 The latter can be described as a trick to resolve an internal crisis – for instance the perceived impossibility of doing anything – by passing it on to someone else. A typical example of this is a socially inhibited, timid person who consistently associates with more extrovert personalities, because the directness of the latter obviates the need for him to express himself. This transference relationship takes place, of course, on the unspoken condition that the Other, the object of transference, continues to play his part. Well, the division of tasks among the neoliberal, 'entrepreneurial' government and cultural actors – as enshrined in the Space and Culture Action Programme – is equally characterized by this sort of transference. The cultural forces, for instance, are expected to politicize the little public space left to us and assign it critical value. In this way, the government fobs off onto the cultural forces what it itself considers impossible: that is, doing anything within current global conditions – other than cater to the needs of big business.

In short, with the neoliberalization of planning, the only way the government still acts as the keeper of the public interest and social justice lies in allocating a budget for art and culture. To put it another way, its only political act consists of creating opportunities for others to do something in which it no longer believes. This can take the form of the allocation of a sum of money, the necessary infrastructure or even know-how to cultural actors. In this way, the general lack of faith in the possibility of a radically democratic city is compensated by ascribing magical powers (and big budgets) to

cultural projects that enthusiastically and – from the entrepreneur's standpoint – even na·ively focus on reconquering the urban public space or the allocation of a place to excluded groups. Art and culture are elevated to the alternative stage upon which things that do not easily fit into the interests of the market are still possible. If today's neoliberal government, in spite of its superficial blather about democracy, still possesses any idealism, it is an 'outsourced' idealism. It has neatly transferred its faith in politics to the cultural sector and even expects a political act from this quarter.

This same transference is also at work within the Zuidas development. Cultural forces are given the task of proving that the mega real estate development is more than the sum of the private interests of a handful of globally operating financial institutions. The cultural forces, for instance, are expected to vouchsafe different, non-market-driven values like beauty, reflection, engagement or spatial quality in an otherwise completely generic development. Here too, the affair will last as long as the cultural actor – the privileged partner of the project developers – keeps playing his or her role as a 'simulator' of a political consciousness.

In this way, the cultural sector is trapped in what Slavoj Zizek calls 'interpassivity'. The demand to generate

permanent friction within the well-oiled machinery of the entrepreneurial city is aimed at preventing problematic situations arising at the political level – it must divert political debate toward discussions of culture's value in life. Precisely because of this, the cultural actor cannot, under any circumstances, step out of his role of a 'freshly disturbing' force. The problem is thus that the transference of the political task to the cultural level is merely grist for the mill of the depoliticization of planning within neoliberalism. The torrent of discussions about how far street art can go, how confrontational it can be in relation to its client, and so forth, must be situated against the backdrop of this problem. These questions are quite capable of unleashing a battle within the holy alliance of the entrepreneurial planning machine, but then on the condition that the cultural sector be prepared to let culture become the stage of this battle. It can do this, for instance, by putting the partnership between developers and cultural forces on the line, by stretching the rules of the game of their amorous relationship with the client to further its own agenda or – to borrow a notion of Boris Groys – by claiming equal aesthetic rights in the area of the design of the spatial environment.26

Conclusion: Culture as the Continuation of Politics by Other Means

The question that arises is therefore not so much how cultural forces can adopt a critical role in the process – which is what is assigned to them by government authorities or development corporations – but in fact how they can subject this process itself to a thorough critical analysis. This raises issues such as the undemocratic character of urban developments, the transformation of the city into a consumer commodity, spatial planning as an extension of the market, and so forth. To adequately tackle these issues, an intermediary position is needed, whereby the cultural actor has both feet in the process, but at the same time is not part of it – an 'extimate' position, in other words.

For an answer to this question we can take inspiration from Slavoj Žižek and his contention that in the present post-ideological era, in which every ideal is negotiable and is subjected to the demands of flexibility, a policy maker with an ethical sensibility has become the exception27 This is a person for whom flexibility belongs to the economic sphere and is not relevant to issues related to the public interest. It is precisely the appearance of such a person 'with a backbone' that has become so traumatic today. Think of the controversy surrounding the Dutch soldier who refused to take part in the Dutch peace-keeping mission in Afghanistan. Although he justified his refusal by arguing that the Dutch army was not adequately prepared, he nevertheless made explicit what everyone already knew: that the mission is part of a new wave of imperialism.

This discussion is highly relevant to a development like Amsterdam-Zuidas. The latter, after all, is the excrescence of the current culture of flexibility, which increasingly colonizes the sphere of the ideal. Think of the government's flexible handling, within the Zuidas, of its traditional task as the defender of the public interest. The latter has been 'translated' without too many scruples in terms of project development. Think also of the flexibility in relation to the individual agenda being demanded within the Zuidas of all social and market partners involved – and this regardless of rank, from project developers to environmental associations, heritage societies and artists. Within this atmosphere, it is considered inevitable that everyone sacrifice some of his or her own agenda points in the name of the common interest – and the smooth progression of the process – and be prepared to negotiate on questions of principle as a matter of course.28

If we follow Zizek's suggestion, then the person who obstinately sticks to his or her guns – and keeps these demands outside any economic negotiation – could hold up this process for a brief moment and therefore create a space in which the terms of this negotiation itself are called into question. Although this person will most likely be portrayed as a spoilsport in a political process that has already degenerated into a flexible negotiating process, he or she will nevertheless come to embody what is known in political philosophy as 'the political'.29 This designates the moment at which the prevailing definition of what is considered politics in a given context is called into question. Within the discussion about the Zuidas this would be the moment at which the definition, considered unimpeachable, of politics as 'an economic negotiation among individual interests and desires' itself becomes the subject of political debate. Well then, if the cultural actor, as presented above, is the figure to

whom all the idealism of society has been transferred and who is trumpeted as the last keeper of the public interest, is he or she not in an ideal position to provoke such a political moment – or better, such a moment of the political?

The traumatic, and therefore effective, aspect of such a position was illustrated by the recent television appearance by Dutch landscape architect Adriaan Geuze in a documentary about the shrinking of the Groene Hartthe 'Green Heart', a large area of natural beauty and agricultural land in the middle of the Randstad urban conglomeration in the west of the Netherlands.30 He strenuously protested against the surreptitious yet systematic disappearance of the Groene Hart, as all kinds of interest groups have been taking bites out of it for years. Not only is this leading to a rapid fragmentation of the Groene Hart, but this increasing 'fragmentation' only leads to its very existence being increasingly called into question – for why hold on to the Groene Hart if it is only a fragmented, inconsistent pile of 'greenery'? In the face of these 'societal developments', Geuze made an impassioned and uncompromising appeal for the integral preservation of the Groene Hart. We need hardly explain that Geuze, with this inflexible attitude, attracted the fury of the entire right-minded planning community. One counter-criticism often expressed by his interlocutors was that he ignored the 'inevitable' societal trends that were leading to the dismantling of the Groene Hart. For instance, Joost Schrijnen – director of spatial planning for the Province of South Holland – flatly stated that Geuze 'had a romanticized picture in his head'. Others faulted him for his fixation on the aspect of 'landscape quality' and disputed whether spatial planning can be redirected to achieve this. Melanie Schultz van Haegen – at that time Junior Minister for Transport and Water Management – resolutely argued that it was not her job to 'beautify the country' and that she focused solely on 'proper management of spatial developments'. Ultimately, it was Wim Derksen – director of the Netherlands Institute for Spatial Research – who made the clearest admission of guilt, in his response to Geuze's criticism that the institute's study on the Groene Hart had accorded too much importance to the space demands of existing forces, allowing them to take over even more of the Groene Hart. Derksen had no answer to Geuze's criticism except to confess that 'in this Dutch political and Dutch planning culture' he had 'given up on the Groene Hart'.

The remarkable thing about this incident is that Geuze intervened in the debate about the Groene Hart from his specific position as a landscape architect, that is to say, as an expert in the domain of landscape quality. He alluded, for instance, to the important Dutch movement of landscape painting that specialized in the unique quality of the light and the sky in the Groene Hart, but also to ecological factors such as the greenhouse effect and water management, and the deterioration of the quality of life for residents of the Randstad as a result of the loss of what might fulfil a function analogous to that of Central Park in New York. In that sense Geuze did the impossible: he broke through the transference relationship in which today's designers are often trapped. Within Dutch spatial planning, transformed into a negotiating process of 'give and take', he took on the role of an uncompromising idealist who did not hesitate, in the pursuit of his interests – which he elevated to the order of the sacrosanct and therefore public interest – to question even the space requirements of society. No wonder, then, that Geuze was vilified. He had violated, after all, the prevailing dogma of Dutch planning, as set out in the Nota Ruimte – a tenet of which is that 'accommodating space claims' contributes to a democratization of space production.

We argue that cultural actors should adopt an equally unshakeable position with respect to their own expertise, whether ascribed to them by others or not. If they are now being presented as the only ones who can bring about the necessary fertile artistic climate or the alternative spatial quality of an urban development, they should do this with the same idealism and the same uncompromising attitude as Geuze. They should declare these issues 'sacrosanct' at the outset of any economic negotiation. The cultural sector should approach its brief to democratize the planning processes in the same way that Geuze did with securing the quality of the Dutch landscape. It must do this with a tenacity that will quickly compel its partners to put their cards on the table about their genuine desire for a democratic urban production. Only in this way can the cultural sector politicize the production of space – where the government refuses to do so – by posing the uncomfortable question about

the utility and benefit of the current neoliberal trend in spatial planning, and call its protagonists on the way in which, in the name of democracy, it makes the arena of social forces complicit in developments like the Zuidas. In short, the cultural actors have to take very seriously the role thrust upon them by a government that only dares to perform its political role through culture, and reformulate their own practice as the continuation of politics by other means.

Notes

2. See for example the Tegenlicht documentary 'Planner's blight: de Strategie van het Gummetje', http://tegenlicht.vpro.nl/nieuws/2005/april/planners-blight-de-strategie-van-het-gummetje.html in which Andre Thomsen (professor of real estate and housing management) criticizes the current restructuring of neighbourhoods in large and medium sized cities for being mainly driven by the profit-seeking of the corporations and the dubious demographic policy of city authorities. In his view, this is based on a market outlook whereby the problem is not the housing stock in the so called problem areas, but the residents.

3. See for example the 'Actieprogramma Ruimte en Cultuur' ('Space and Culture Action Programme') launched by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Welfare in June 2005, www.minocw.nllcultuur/publicaties/

4. See www.virtueel-museum.nl/

5. More specifically, Simon den Hartog (former director of the Rietveld Academie) was appointed as supervisor. The website of the Virtual Museum features this text: 'Den Hartog put together a programming council and developed a vision with a practical, implementable plan for the realization of this artistic climate. Based on this vision, the Virtual Museum Zuidas foundation was officially founded in 2003. The Zuidas area itself is viewed as a kind of museum. A constantly changing space in which art has a place and within which new art forms can be created. The Zuidas Virtual Musem is an umbrella label for temporary and permanent activities, an exhibition and exchange centre, visible as well as more invisible projects in the Zuidas.' www.virtueel-museum.nl/(See also Henk de Vroom's article elsewhere in this volume.)

6. See www.virtueel-museum.nl/index.html

7. Curator/artist Hinrich Sachs made this observation during a symposium at the Jan van Eyck Academie (19 April 2006) about the role of design in the development of Amsterdam-Zuidas.

8. Think of the 'Logo Parc' initiative, a research project of the Jan van Eyck Academie. (See also Daniel van der Velden's article elsewhere in this volume.)

9. The state is the initiator and co-financial backer of the necessary adaptation of the main infrastructure, in particular. The city of Amsterdam is in charge of planning and implementation: cf Ministries of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment, of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality, of Transport and Water Management and of Economic Affairs, Nota ruimte. Ruimte voor ontwikkeling, 2006, p. 44; www.zuidas.nl/smartsite.dws?id=570. In addition, the city and the state are also partners in the development corporation Zuidas NV, which serves as the coordinator of the Zuidas projects. Other partners include ABN-Amro, lNG, Fortis, Rabobank, Bank Nederlandse Gemeenten.

10. This is a joint venture with the business sector to put the city and the region on the international map. The city executive's contribution is 51 million Eura.

11. Nota ruimte. Ruimte voor ontwikke/ing, op. cit., p. 44 (see note 9). All the key projects involve developments in and around the high-speed rail stations. For more information about the Zuidas as a key project, see www.vrom.nl/pagina.html?id=8309

12. On the Nova-DenHaag Vandaag television programme, 23 May 2006.

13. Pieter Tordoir, 'The economic pentagon: central business districts in the global economy: Consequences for the Zuidas development', in Willem Salet and Stan Majoor (eds.) Amsterdam Zuidas. European Space (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2005), pp. 99-122.

14. Looming in the background are negative reports noting that the Netherlands is dropping ever further out the international top rankings. Whereas the Netherlands still occupied fourth place on the World Economic Forum's list in 2000, by 2005 it had been relegated to 12th place.

15. Nota ruimte. Ruimte voor ontwikkeling, op. cit., p. 31 (see note 9).

16. See also Netherlands Institute for Spatial Research, Ex ante toets Nota Ruimte (Rotterdam: NAi Publishers, 2004), p. 10. In this publication, it argues that of the four traditional values that can steer a spatial planning policy-social equitability, financial economics, sustainability and spatial quality – the current planning regime has clearly opted for the second.

17. Ibidem.

18. Ibidem.

19. Erik Swyngedouw, 'A new urbanity? The ambiguous politics of large-scale urban development projects in European cities', in: Salet and Majoor (eds.), op. cit., pp. 61-79 (see note 13). Think also of the statement by the Netherlands Institute for Spatial Research that current planning 'is characterized by an offensive approach, in which stimulation, development and design take precedence. In this way, governments can attempt, together with social organizations, businesses and citizens, to exploit the opportunities present in a given region as fully as possible.' (italics by the
author) Netherlands Institute for Spatial Research, Ontwikkellingsplanologie. Lessen uit de praktijk (Rotterdam: NAi Publishers, 2003).

20. The Netherlands Institute for Spatial Reseorch also wonders, rightly, whether it is at all the task of the government to help finance such things as office parks (Ex ante toets Nota Ruimte, op. cit., p. 11, see note 16). It wonders whether the government should compensate for market failures that are actually the responsibility of the private sector, not the public sector.

21. It is disconcerting to observe how cultural actors often take on a similar role. Think of the cultural initiative Welcome in my backyard! (WiMBY!) by the architecture history agency Crimson in Hoogvliet. WiMBY! set out to document the potential for redevelopment of the problem community through innovative proposals. With the 'test factory' praject (campus Hoogvliet), for instance, the initiative tried to reconnect employment opportunities in the community to the activity in the Port of Rotterdam, which had turned Hoogvliet, as a result of mass technological developments and outsourcing to low-wage

BAVO is an independent research collective focused on the political dimension of art, architecture and planning founded by architect-philosophers Gideon Boie and Matthias Pauwels.

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