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Hiding behind the Laptop

Barbara Visser

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Hiding behind the Laptop

Despite its master plan, which suggests a pleasant coherence in the public space, the scale and the fragmentation of the Zuidas elicits agoraphobia.

Its name is actually Zuidas, without the 'the', but that is literally dumb. In five years, when we're used to it, no one will hear that it's missing an article. But it will have to be said without it for quite a long time first.

Don't panic. Take a deep breath. Concentrate on one element that mirrors the whole. There are mirrors aplenty. Surely fractal theory should be applicable here somewhere?

If you have to focus on one thing, why not ING House, the office building meant to be futuristic and saddled with numerous pejorative nicknames, yet considered fan-tas-tic by everybody?

The edifice has its own website, on which one can take a virtual tour. The descriptions of the building's architecture, furnishings and panoramic views evoke the atmosphere of the hypermodern office building Monsieur Hulot visits in the film *Playtime*,¹ leaving him completely bewildered. He repeatedly comes in conflict with the latest technological gadgets that pop up unexpectedly all over the building. Modernity presses in upon him to such an extent that he has great difficulty figuring out how to respond. Like the building, he begins to behave more and more strangely.

The other visitors in the film, on the contrary, seem to take on their role as extras effortlessly, allowing the star quality of the building to shine through.

The website of ING House notes:

The Boardroom features a floor partly made of glass, which merges with a curved, angled glass wall. Wide slats serve as sunscreens. From here one looks out toward the west over the Nieuwe Meer and one has a view of a large section of the ring motorway. Schiphol Airport lies in the distance. The size of the conference table is adjustable.

ING House clearly differs from the office building in Tati's film in one respect: whereas Tati reduced the plant kingdom to one chrysanthemum on a lady's hat, in the ING spaceship plants are the X Factor. They symbolize quality, sustainability and growth, and will silence any criticism:

In the north loggia, a jungle atmosphere predominates. The garden links the east and west sections of this level. The inner gardens are considered the visual highlights of the building.

From this level, one has a view of the large outer patio, which begins on the 8th floor, in which eight Scots pines grow among royal ferns and heath berries.

Events such as retirement parties and anniversary receptions are held in the palm greenhouse, among the eight tall Livingstone palms planted in moveable pots. Their special design allows these to serve as tables as well. Not your run-of-the-mill reception room.

In reality, the building has been placed on a Teletubbie hill.

But the employees love working there, as evidenced by the quotes from the members of staff, from the highest to the lowest level, who were interviewed. Happy workers – it's finally been achieved. A member of the board of directors notes on the website:

There is so much more quality here than in the old building. I find it a fantastic work environment – really optimal, with an exceptional amount of room for interaction.

I use the glass staircases that link the 8th, 9th and 10th floors a lot – not just because of the short lines of communication, but to get some extra exercise as well.

2

Getting Out There

It is the 23rd of March and that's what the world outside looks like, too. I can't come up with any more good reasons to avoid the Zuidas. At the WTC-plein you're greeted by a forest of prescriptive and proscriptive signs. I'll quote one off the top of my head:

Those who do not leave their bikes in the permanently overcrowded bike rack will not be immediately shot, but the bikes go straight to the pound in Halfweg. NB: locks are not compensated for.

People in suits eat their ciabatta mozzarella sandwiches in the glaring sun, sitting on the broad rim of a plant container in which frail new saplings have been planted. Their name tags are wider than their trunks.

A photo shoot is going on in the gleaming sandwich shop on the ground floor. A girl holding an unused reflector screen is flirting with an older member of the crew. The screen twists and turns with her out of embarrassment. Here too, filming is waiting with glamour. The scene in question is about a guy in a sand-coloured suit eating a mozzarella sandwich. You can tell he's in the film from his suit: real people virtually never wear sand-coloured suits.

2.1

The Project Bureau

The project bureau stands out from the rest of the WTC design by its fragments of text on glass doors. Inside, three wall-sized images of the area are hung. On the left, a floor-to-ceiling aerial photograph, next to it an illustrated map, and on the wall to its right a schematic projection of Zuidas.

The human interfaces exchange lunch ideas over the office partition. On a pillar in the room are hung transparent holders containing glossy A4 brochures of the projects at the Zuidas: Gershwin, Vivaldi, Mahler. In the brochure, a just-completed building is still a utopian airbrush projection. It features a gleaming façade in which the cracks of terror are part of the design. Post-retro-modern seems the most applicable label. The brochure boasts about the fact that the building was erected in a little over a month using a slidingform construction. This is achieved by pouring concrete 24 hours a day, from the bottom of the foundation to the current height of 95 metres: 3.166667 metres per day. It doesn't seem like much, but it is.

A large maquette takes up half of the floor space in the room. A change in scale is always welcome, especially if it makes you grow.

From this perspective, thinking about the rise of a future city centre (but not calling it that) is comfortable. The artist can only look sceptically on the haphazard way progress is being shaped here, but cynicism is not constructive in the light of progress.

Properly considered, the only function of an artificial structure is that it provides a framework for the element of chance. And the artist is there to intercept it. Without the use of staged chance – also known as added value – there remains an autistic 1:1 maquette in which only the wads of chewing gum on the street still represent chance. The artist races around the Zuidas, armed with a butterfly net, in search of possibilities.

Can we already say 'races around Zuidas', or do we still need the 'the'?

Let's take a quick photo in the foyer of the WTC. No security guards in sight – until you take a photo, of course. They suddenly appear out of nowhere, from every direction. Quick, put on the mask of the innocent tourist and, as a white woman, you're immediately cleared of suspicion.

2.2

Wandering

What strikes you as you cycle across Zuidas is the ear-splitting noise. It's terrible. Unbearable. The construction, the motorway, the trains, the planes, the wind. Very few things can survive here. The word pandemonium spontaneously comes to mind, something it never does. The fact that the word was first used in John Milton's Paradise Lost doesn't help matters very much.

The optimist and the project developer think (other than about money, money and more money) that the building noises will eventually subside. And then? Then you'll hear Vivaldi, or Mahler's Fourth – 'Mahler-4', in Zuidas parlance.

Man may have perfected his habitat since the Stone Age, but according to science, he still operates, psychologically, at a rudimentary level.

Imagine a pair of Jacksonii chameleons – an animal that looks like a prehistoric caricature of itself – placed in a scale-model version of a modern interior, instead of the usual simulation of mossy rocks. Their happiness and sadness are constantly recorded by a camera (where have we seen that before?). The apartment is decorated with the best scale-model Vitra furniture, an indoor fountain sculpture, and of course elements are applied in abstract form.

The graceful and taut movements of this animal fit in perfectly with the sleek design of the apartment, but the lifestyle of the chameleon, unchanged since primordial times, will eventually take a devastating toll on the environment: droppings, flies and half-eaten cockroaches will increasingly dominate the decor.

Could evolution be accelerated by placing these primeval creatures in a modernized environment? Would they

acquire a different view of the world? Would they behave differently, develop a taste?

The most conspicuous features of the Jacksonii are three large horns on the snout. These horns are totally out of proportion with the rest of the body. These caricaturesque features make the animal seem highly unnatural. It looks like a rather unsuccessful Disney character, conceived by a cartoonist as a joke on a Friday afternoon.

The huge maquette of Zuidas could be an alternative biotope for our Jacksonii. The film that would be shot of this would be highly reminiscent of woodenly animated fantasy monster films like the 1933 version of King Kong, films that owe a great deal of their effect to the endearing nature of their technical limitations.

Back on the bike. I pass a white line drawing on the road. Not lines and arrows, but the outline of a human body, in the shape of a person leaping. The return of the human scale to Zuidas, albeit in a temporary form. An unlucky chance.

1. *Playtime*, 70mm feature film by Jacques Tati, 1967.

Zuidas ABC

(loosely based on Gustave Flaubert's *Dictionnaire des idées reçues*)

A

Accessibility – These days, a quality in and of itself. Physically or virtually, you are nowhere without it.

Ambition – Comes with the start of everything. What comes with it, the story doesn't tell.

Art – Has it tough all over.

B

Banks of the IJ – The intellectual little brother of Zuidas.

Beethoven – Important composer. Plagued by deafness.

C

Charity – Still exists, apparently. See Sports Clubs.

Composer – Other than the word itself, has nothing to do with music composers.

Concept Vision – An idea with ambition, the content of which will be announced soon.

D

Desire Image – Something should be left to be desired.

Development – You can push the cart, or you can pull it.

Dock Model – When accessibility and aesthetics do not go together.

E

Energy – You can save this.

Environment – Doesn't mean setting here either.

F

Facilities – Everything has been thought of, especially what is being thought about now.

Function Mix – All parties benefit from this.

G

Gershwin – Important composer. The inspiration for grand building projects.

H

High Buildings – Great winds fall upon them. See Wind Nuisance.

Housing – Function intended to counter the spectre from the US.

I

Infrastructure – Always open to improvement.

ING House – What people used to think the future looked like. Popular building, in spite of its generally accepted ugliness.

K

Kiss & Ride – The limit of accessibility.

M

Mahler – Important composer. Putting a number after the name makes it a building designation.

Master Plan – Big idea, usually from one man. See Pi de Bruijn.

Museum Parcel – Plot of land that no bank wants.

N

Noord-Zuid Line – Line that also runs from South to North.

P

Peace and Quiet – What everyone is after. Pedestrians – Mostly get underfoot. Make the decor in the brochures look good.

Pi de Bruijn – See Master Plan

Play – Something with marbles.

Principles – Ambition and Strategy translated into an A4.

Public Space – Not for bicycles outside the racks provided.

Q

Quarantine – Is usually the word for the Q.

R

Recreation – Important, apparently, but no one can explain why.

S

Spatial Planning – Term that takes away the fear of the new.

Sports Clubs – Charity. Are tolerated. See Function Mix.

Strategy – Contemporary method of predicting the future. Is necessary to success. See Ambition.

Sustainability – Word you use when you've had enough of the criticism that you only care about money.

T

Top Location – Does have something to do with height.

Traffic and Transport – See Accessibility. See Dock Model. See Environment. See Infrastructure. See Kiss & Ride. See NoordZuid Line. See Public Space. See Spatial Planning.

Trial Zone – Plot of land where blunders can still be corrected.

V

Vivaldi – Important composer. Cannot be devalued.

Vision – Word that always does well in presentations.

W

Water – Man is 64 percent water.

Wind Nuisance – There are no problems, only challenges.

WTC – Used to stand in a wasteland. The building that started it all. See Ambition.

X

X Factor – Used to be called having it.

Y

Young Professionals – The more professional they are, the faster they age.

Z

Zuidas – Try to use it without the ‘the’ in front.

[Barbara Visser](#) is a visual artist. She works with a diversity of media, such as photography, film, video, text, printed mailer and performance. In her work she analyzes the authenticity and ambiguity of the image as well as the view of the spectator.

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