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Jan van Eyck Academie – Logo Parc

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About the Zuidas, two kinds of information abound: promotions on the one hand, cynical comments on the other. About what is still to come, we hear utopian promises, and prophecies of doom. Zuidas has bank offices, like ING House and the head office of ABN Amro. There is a large number of mixed-use office buildings, such as 'Vinoly' – at an earlier occasion referred to as 'the corporate crack' – and the 'Ito-tower'. The city plan for this area, filled with buildings named after their architects, is called 'Mahler Four.' Zuidas is, according to itself, the post-hoc completion of the Plan Zuid by H.P. Berlage, who foresaw a stunning 'South Station' crowning the 'Minerva-Axis' running from Amsterdam South in the direction of Buitenveldert.

At the end of 2004, according to Het Financieele Dagblad, almost one and a half million square metres of vacant office space was for rent in Amsterdam. In fact, technically speaking, there is no 'need' for Zuidas; the same offices with system ceilings are for rent elsewhere around the ring road and probably even for less money. As a business centre, Zuidas thus violates one of its own key economic rules – and nevertheless it manages to lure away firms who used to be conveniently situated in the city centre, on the canals, Leidseplein, or Amsterdam South.

How is this possible? These businesses would never move to an average suburban office park; not only would such an environment be considered too anonymous and too much associated with logistics, also, it would not support the sense of stability, quality and class associated with their businesses. At the Zuidas, a lot of work is done to make the area attractive. Wagamama – a chain of noodle restaurants whose mission it is to 'celebrate consistency and quality in everything we do' – is there, as well as Club Sportive, a trendy chain of fitness centres. And there are many more examples.

As such, in a sense, Zuidas is highly experimental. At a substantial level, here we see how what is permanently at risk of being an urban 'dead zone', a nine-to-five area for women and men dressed in impeccable suits, is put, or should we say forced, into a position of permanent nutrition by the flows of entertainment, information, culture, and traffic. As such, we should re-investigate Berlage's dream of a station Zuid. In his days, a station building was not a symbol of mobility but a monument of progress and citizenship per se. Nowadays, we tend not to regard stations as monuments but rather as transitory spaces that have as such nothing to do with where they are located, as long as they are near something else.

As banks and law firms dominate Zuidas, both represent a professional field with a high interest in risk management. The risks that stockbrokers take in the dealing room, are fully compensated by a system of surface conventions centered around 'quality'. The leased Audi A6, the suits, the shoes, the Eames chairs that Camiel van Winkel has so eloquently exposed in his essay King Midas in Wonderland, all work at maintaining quality and stability at face value. This culture of quality – which of course comes at a price – is at Zuidas matched with

an ambition that we would call ‘wine and dine urbanism’; the ambition to create a city where anyone can experience what it’s like being at the top of the social food chain. While we would seem to think that towards the top of the pyramid, competition is harsh, at the same time, there is a tremendous sense of uniformity among the inhabitants of Zuidas, which contributes to a certain disinterest and even a certain avoidance of the public places around. Bankers and lawyers are mainly seen outside smoking cigarettes, or making private phone calls, and therewith the usage of public space seems for them sometimes more the negative result of office policies, than the positive result of people choosing public space over other available places and territories.

Before going into an analysis of what this means, we would like to share with you another Zuidas obsession, that of the ‘creative city’. ‘Creative city’, like ‘creative class’, is a buzzword appearing in every document on every Dutch mayor’s desk at the moment and ready to be approved – replacing in fact the former myths of industrial productivity and business opportunities by an even greater bubble: the human capacity to be creative.

In fact, the originator of words like ‘creative class’ and ‘creative city’, is American economist Richard Florida. What he implies is that value raises and economic life is stimulated by the presence of creative people, who are always first to conquer any given neglected urban zone with their natural appetite for the new... Creative people, in Florida’s view, have the unique ability to foresee growth and thus act as a valuable forecast to investment value. In that sense, the creative class ‘colonizes’ the forgotten and discarded areas of cities to make them market-ready. In a simple linear process:

CREATIVITY > CULTURE > VALUE

creativity and economy are interrelated.

It is at this point where we could ask the question, as the collective of architectural theoreticians BAVO has done so effectively in their recent campaign for the Uncreative City, whether the creative class does in essence does not consist of the unpaid agents of liberal democracy?

Zuidas is using a reverse order:

VALUE > CULTURE > CREATIVITY

hoping that Zuidas, despite the level of its rents (highest in the Netherlands), will also become a creative city. According to Renée Hoogendoorn of ING Real Estate, one of Zuidas’ main strategic partners, the value increase of real estate around cultural facilities has inspired ING to finance a design museum at Zuidas; she describes it as a pro-active investment into the future reality of the place.

It is of special importance that a design museum is aimed for. While a specific, relevant, and globally recognized cultural product, ‘design’ is at the same time also a fetish of value. One would in a sense really wonder why, in an area already completely subjected to the regime of design, museum visitors would come, and pay, to look at design. The answer is quite simple: the museum will be perhaps an ultimate affirmation of the values both suggested and established by the Zuidas. Thus, the museum is not, as it would seem, a strangely contradictory cultural institution amidst a sea of commercial sharks, it is rather the opposite: the design museum is the queen bee among them.

Unlike works of art, works of design tend to offer only a limited amount of narrative beyond their immediate surface. A continuous process of breakdown of existing conventions, and establishment of new conventions, can, in design, be carried out without affecting the underlying economies and value systems of the trade that design is. In other words, nothing is put at risk, now that the materialized surplus value of capitalism that is design, can take any possible and thinkable shape. While it is the variety of shapes in design that legitimizes a museum for them, it is the stability underneath this regime that legitimizes this museum being at Zuidas.

There is, however, another important criterium for the museum, and that is its being and existing in public. Although private museums exist, a museum as an idea, as a place, and as an architectural structure, is first and

foremostly understood in terms of public interest, public access, public relevance, and public space. Far from an 'open' space – to be 'filled in' according to the wishes of those who wish to decide – 'public space' in general is beset with a whole range of ideas and values that consider political, ethical and economic factors and have as such little to do with stability, agreement, or value, for it is in public space that such conventions should be under debate.

In this line of thinking, we will now consider whether Zuidas qualifies for a public space in full, in part, or not at all. We can tell you in advance the conclusion: neither of these three criteria give a satisfactory description of what is happening at Zuidas. That means that the search for a new category to fit in Zuidas, is as crucial as the public space issue itself.

Law firms, financial and administrative businesses, and the banking sector, are very visible professions in society. In newspapers, we read on a daily basis about mergers and acquisitions, court cases, and accounting scandals. Parallel to a widely shared social fascination with finance, and wealth – see for instance *Quote* magazine, *Miljonair* magazine and the new Talpa real life series *De Gouden Kooi* – top lawyers and bankers have become recognized and admired public figures. As a business centre, these branches also form the main occupants of Zuidas – an area located at a distance from the arena where the forces of law and capital are at work, and where their influence is most felt.

The unique quality of a city like Amsterdam has always been that bankers and lawyers, on the canals, had to share their public space with punk rockers, squatters, backpackers and artists; a situation that, firmly situated in the post-1968 mentality, had very strong public space and democratic qualities. At Zuidas, such confrontations no longer take place. In fact, lawyers, bankers and accountants are taken to an elite wildlife reserve where they, among their peers, are no longer bothered with society. One can state that at Zuidas maybe not necessarily the city, but then rather, society, is suspended. Almost everyone at Zuidas, has a professional interest or target in being there. Also, the future residential apartments currently under development are conceived in direct connection to such professionalism; these residential apartments are conceived as self-sufficient hubs with in-house fitness, laundry, pools, and shopping services. One lives and works in an enclave rather than a city, an ABN-Ville where one can lounge and enjoy cocktails surrounded by high quality design, far away from society.

Meanwhile, the urban quality of ABN-Ville is actually a-social, in the sense that the choice for the public space, by its users, is a second choice. One is in the street to smoke or to make private phone calls. According to Maarten Hajer and Arnold Reijndorp, public domain exists by confrontation: 'Different groups attach to a place and must work at sharing it.' According to this definition, Zuidas is not public domain, as there is no negotiation about the usage of the actual space. One cannot regard lawyers and bankers as 'different groups', because Hajer and Reijndorp imply with 'difference': social class, ethnicity, and age. Then, this non-confrontation, or non-difference, this resemblance or likeness, is played out in a domain that is, purely in technical terms, still a public space. What to make of it?

Rather than endlessly weighing Zuidas, we could as well rename it, just for the time being, 'post-public space'. As in post-punk, there are many remnants of the past condition of public space, and it is these remnants that in fact are most obscuring radical and original solutions for Zuidas space design. How do we map these remnants? Lara Schrijver, a Dutch architect and theoretician, asks whether the definition of public domain is itself active or passive. Public space is not simply all that is not private, it is not simply the street – it is created precisely at the moment we engage in contact and relations with strangers. Post-public space appears when urban inventory is ready to be used: trashcans, bike parkings, public green, public art, street lights and even shops – whose usage is not happening according to plan, or the result of which does not exceed the sum of its parts. This space is just passively public, all requirements are there, except for the actual usage that implies the contact with strangers. Isn't Zuidas then pre-public? It is after all still in the process of becoming?

Being public certainly is the ambition. But this ambition is not equally shared by all parties involved. Starting with the promotional materials – there are huge differences. All parties want Zuidas to be fantastic. But the emphasis on the public sphere is mainly laid in those publicities signed with the web address ‘Zuidas.nl’.

Only there we hear of terraces, future festivals, high quality street light design, and the high quality stone of which the streets are made, tested by women with different types of shoes and a disabled person in a wheelchair.

The private developers – among whom ING Real Estate and Fortis Real Estate, both of them branches of banks – put their accent differently. Their story is one of lifestyle and individualism; despite the hopeful announcement of shopping and lounging – ‘wine & dine urbanism’ – no promises are made of an actually interesting public domain. This is the same jargon that lures a lifestyle tourist to Barcelona on the arguably fashionable pages of an inflight magazine.

It would seem obvious to point at a lack of identity here. If so many blatant cliché’s are needed to pump up Zuidas, it might as well be a ‘non-place’. Hajer and Reijndorp, in their study, speak of Marc Augé’s ‘non-place’; a term coined to denote the featureless, relationless, a-historical spaces of mobility and consumption. ‘The space of non-place creates neither singular identity nor relations; only solitude, and similitude.’

It is important here that Augé sees absence of relations as a prerequisite for non-place. The question is whether Zuidas fulfills all criteria for a non-place, like office parks and shopping malls fulfill those criteria. The answer is, that while Zuidas lacks a historical context, it does have relations. For instance, it is 24 hours a day connected to the global flow of money and information. Zuidas is anchored in the network.

Now the non-usage of Zuidas public space itself is caused by a becoming virtual and disembedded of the relationships that were, in a traditional city, still tangible, physically situated relationships based on the proximity of family members, their relatives, their classmates, etc. etc.

In the Amsterdam Creative Index, Maarten Hajer calls Zuidas a ‘blank zone, with no identity, and therefore a place no one wants to visit.’ The article’s author, Jaap Huisman, notes that we all agree that the ‘quality’ of public space at Zuidas will be crucial to its success. Amsterdam University professor Robert Kloosterman says in the same publication: ‘Have Koolhaas design a museum, or MVRDV. The masses will flock to it’.

We should add here, that the qualities formerly ascribed to the museum ‘per se’ – it being a sanctuary for culture, a public place par excellence – have now shifted completely to its author. In a context where signs and symbols operate largely disembedded from their surroundings, there is a certain aura to the identity of the maker, the author, who re-locates the museum in a mental hierarchy that is absolutely and positively wallpaperized – a hierarchy itself produced and created by disembedding quality from its locus. ‘Quality’, or so it seems, can, in architecture, only be measured by the stardom of the architect. Such stardom is already exploited by naming Zuidas buildings after their architects. ‘Quality’ equals the most dominant agreement in this field: the status of the architect who designed it.

Then – how to measure the ‘quality’ of public space? Ruwan Aluvihare, an architect heading the Department of Urban Planning at Amsterdam Municipality, arranged for public space at Zuidas, and hence, also for its ‘quality’. In his case, neither his first name, as in ‘Rem’, neither his last name, as in ‘Koolhaas’, suffice to prove ‘quality’. Let us stress here: this is not a personal assault on Ruwan Aluvihare or his work, neither his 122 Google hits. Quote from the Amsterdam Creative Index: ‘The streets running north to south will be lined with trees; those going east to west will be narrower, with trees on the north side only. All will be green lanes that serve to relieve the glass and steel mass of the office blocks.’

Please note: the trees are intended to undo the buildings! Ruwan Aluvihare designed Zuidplein, the very first public space ready at Zuidas. The brochure released on the occasion of its inauguration in 2004, says, for

instance, that:

‘In planning, Zuidplein will be a lively place, where people dwell, meet each other, and meet strangers.’

Rather than a reality, this is a script for public space; the planners have learned their lesson all too well, knowing what public domain is from textbook values, almost the ‘norms & values’ our current prime minister is so inclined to broadcast. ‘Liveliness’ at Zuidplein is, according to the inaugurative brochure, created by ‘bars, a supermarket, a hairdresser, a dry cleaner, a bookshop and a great variety of smaller shops’ and even ‘an open air market.’ And, again, the role of nature: ‘Green is important at Zuidas, where there will be a lot of high-rise. This is why we have chosen to emphasize green as a counterweight to the built environment. Zuidas will have to be a landscape.’ But: ‘The trees will be replaced when they get too high. A guaranteed period of ten years has been appointed. The chosen parameters for growth imply that many trees will never grow to mature size.’ We really should stop here. This is not in any way to criticize Ruwan Aluvihare, architect of public space at Zuidas. It is probably not even his fault. We should return to the rather vague term of ‘quality’, where we agree with Camiel van Winkel when he already in 1997 noted the following:

‘The notion of quality of public space is meaningless without further specification. The quality of public space is not a neutral concept. There is no justification whatsoever for using this concept “as is”, as if it were self-explanatory. Yet this is precisely what happens in the master plan of Zuidas.’

Now, nine years after Van Winkel wrote this, we are witness no longer to a plan but to a built environment where, or so it seems, at least ‘quality’ in architecture is profoundly incompatible with ‘quality’ of public space. The contribution of signature architects starts really with a direct contribution to the city’s image – adding a ‘landmark’ or ‘brand quality’ that can be easily disembedded from its original place and freely float in the global economy of images. But the ‘quality’ of design for public space is entirely based on ‘intrinsically good’ gestures, such as open-air markets, green, pavement, and benches. We have already seen that post-public space emerges, when an inventory to provide for this intrinsic quality gets installed in the city ‘as is’, without further questions asked and largely without the expected effects happening. Thus, the position of public space designers responsible for Zuidas is extremely interesting, because they have been acting like ghostwriters, authorless authors, ghosts in the machine who, precisely at the moment that they should be held accountable for their acts, mysteriously have disappeared. It is the task of a project like Logo Parc to open up, again, the parameters for public space design, and to do so retroactively. The project started with a main concern – a criticism on Zuidas as a symbol, in a historical comparison with the parks of Versailles and La Villette. Versailles symbolized the territorial power of France and Louis Quatorze. In La Villette, Bernard Tschumi provided a symbol of the power of democracy by ‘confronting citizens’ in uncanny pavilions and follies. Zuidas – embodying the power of economy – is lacking a symbolic translation of this idea. Meanwhile we have shifted to a more general critical inquiry to Zuidas. As we have seen, Zuidas is complicated because its public life is unusual. Current public space design of Zuidas has been conceived from, and thinking towards, ‘desirable’ forms of city life.

This is why at Zuidas, new ideas about public space and its design are needed and these ideas need signatures, too; they should not be conceived in anonymity. Thus, we interpret the post-public state of Zuidas not as regressive or failed, but as a starting point for new possibilities, consisting of four programmatic layers: Landscape, communication, social life, and virtuality. These elements, ranging from the concrete to the intangible, are essential ingredients to post-public space, where an abundance of digital technologies and networks develops parallel to an ever greater distancing from historical city centres. This creates new forms of behaviour. Public space is, potentially, a symbol of this behaviour.

The most important parameters of public space have to do with their accessibility – free access, usability – obvious use and need to use, and communality – it is a social space. The typologies developed ‘over the years’ for public space, like the piazza, the public sculpture, etc., still linger around in today’s (Zuidas) public spaces

where effectively, the order has been reversed: in order to ‘prove’ the existence of public space, its design is firstly completely conformed to typologies that confirm – on paper – ‘public space’, while essential preconditions for the actual use and meaning are missing, or have changed.

Logo Parc is a platform that opens up the public space assignment for Zuidas. The preconditions are that public space design is not ‘the last factor’, but is also a factor that ‘makes’ a place. In that sense, public space itself is not a passive term, but an active modus (and so, its design), that is continuously looking for opportunities and new questions.

At the same time, Logo Parc is a utopia; it contains forms and images that refer to a hypothetical, unrealized, and even impossible configuration of Zuidas. The game makes this utopia usable and participatory. The strategic aim to ‘double’ Zuidas and to become more popular online than the ‘real’ Zuidas, is a new feature of the utopian drive. Especially since, in the game environment, one can ‘engage in contact with strangers’!

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