



[PDF](#)

2004

You Need Art When You Build a City

Hanne Hagenaaars

With his book, *Espèces d'espaces* (1974), Georges Perec created what is perhaps the most beautiful of all monuments to the public space. In it, he investigates the meaning of the space around us by observing it intensively, naming it and by enumerating and collecting its aspects. Perec describes his friend's plan to live for a month at an international airport without leaving it. It would seem an ideal place: it has heating, water, sanitary facilities and all the stores you could possibly want or need. Through this proposal, what is normally an in-transit route is transformed into a kind of consumer paradise residence for a vagrant with a luxury lifestyle.

Perec sees the value of the plan in its 'exotic' side, i.e., in its transposition of habits and rhythms and in the rapidity with which even this life becomes monotonous. 'One certainly could not draw any practical conclusions from such a project,' writes Perec. In the seventies, such a plan could be carried out without much difficulty. Today, this would be more daunting: cameras would soon discover you doing it, and security would eject you. Airports have become so-called capsule locations (a term of René Boomkens'), where strict rules apply to who may or may not enter.

In an article entitled 'Rotterdam Central, from public area to friction-free space' (*NRC Handelsblad*, 8 September 2002), a picture is sketched of Rotterdam's Central Station, now and in the future. In the present (2002), truants and shady types wander through the space; failures, homeless and drug addicts loiter, to the irritation of travellers. The owner of the station, the Dutch Railroad Company (NS), for whom it is a priority to maintain control and safety, has installed 134 cameras which monitor the station. At night, tickets are checked "in order to keep the riffraff out." The check was introduced as a compromise measure, after the NS had closed off the tunnel entirely, making Rotterdam Noord accessible only via the unsafe tunnel on the left side of the station. "The station is not an island – it would be unacceptable for us to keep it free of undesirables inside while hell broke loose outside," comments a spokesman for the railroad police sympathetically, and putting the problem in a nutshell. The station was an unpleasant place, and it is certainly true that something had to be done about it. At the same time, though, events here fit perfectly into the trend toward making more and more places 'free of undesirables' and closing them off. An increasing number of public spaces are being transformed into friction-free consumer paradises – safe, clean islands. But who is looking after the 'riffraff'?

In much extremer form, this process of capsule formation plays a role in the development of gated communities. These residential islands, far removed from the outskirts of cities have their advantages: safety, like-minded people, a swimming pool and other comforts. But the consequences of such a narrowing of one's field of vision are far-reaching. As someone growing up in a family in a gated community, you will have to go out of your way to come into contact with opposed or contrary views. And what does a gated community mean for those who remain behind?

Gated communities, shopping malls and other capsules are outgrowths of the tendency to seek safety among

like-minded people and by means of physical demarcations. Such an impulse receives additional encouragement from those two great bringers of uniformity: the media and commerce. Styling is more and more responsible for our world's appearance. Thanks to (TV)magazines, now everyone knows how they must dress, how they must furnish their homes and even how their children can belong to the trendy group (e.g., by reading the magazine *KEK*). And the generation not interested in participating in this has itself already been branded a trend, the 'do it yourself generation'. Advertising is directed toward presenting a nice, uniform world free of friction. *H&M* sells the same 'copy' of fashion worldwide. Teeth must be straightened, noses enlarged or made smaller, everyone wears blue jeans, everyone and everything strives for ever greater beauty, in the form of a uniform ideal. Every day the same train, the same spot at work, surrounded by people all indoctrinated with the same opinions provides one with little stimulation. Perec: "What we call everydayness is not automatic and inevitable, but obscure and opaque: a form of blindness, a kind of anaesthesia." A society benefits from diversity: each person develops with the help of new opinions, other conceptions, contacts with people from all walks of life.

What kind of meaning does art have which has been realised as the result of a commission in this (semi-)public space? Commissioned art involves limitations, conflicting interests, rules, committees, residents, and now also project developers. It must compete with traffic signs and the omnipresent commerciality. An attractive aspect of art in public spaces is that it can reach a wide public and might be able to inject a different note into an increasingly uniform world. Good art should be able to stimulate one to expand one's world, and this seldom happens in the form of a fixed idea or view. Or, as Arnon Grunberg formulated it: "It would be good if books (and art) could be an insidious poison which would slowly transform your ideas and your world. And then you would say one day: I don't want to push a shopping cart through the supermarket anymore" (Arnon Grunberg, 'Without a cage, the mouse disappears,' *NRC Handelsblad*, 13 November 1998). Sometimes art functions like an electroshock.

It is the special, disturbing and elusive qualities of art which are so intriguing and prompt one to think about one's identity and the bases of one's life. Art drags you into another world. The book *Disgrace* by J.M. Coetzee draws the reader into the life of David Lurie, someone you perhaps would not want to know in real life. This is art at its best: it creates an encounter with an appalling history and causes the reader to contemplate and accept the conflicts which life brings. In the visual arts, as well, there are sufficient examples of this: Sylvie Zijlman, who bases the work *Reconstruction* on the irreconcilable feelings generated by images of carpet of bombs falling on Baghdad: beautiful and horrible at once; Philip Guston, who painted his hooded figures because of a need to investigate "how it is to be bad." Franz West let five silly-looking, pale coloured sausages be themselves as they lay uselessly on a field of grass, as an absurd Beckett-like addition to reality (*Qwertz*). Gijs Assmann placed an intractable donkey in Gouda as a moral beacon, because he is not afraid to be a moralist. Somewhere on a wall, Jeroen Jongeleen wrote "For 75 guilders I'll do anything," as a powerful statement. The works of Gordon Matta-Clark continue to make a deep impression, even on a generation which no longer had an opportunity to see his actual work.

The public space has a need for useless art, for the intensity of temporary art, for investigation, for illegal art, for art as consolation and as beacon. There must be space for individual artistic utterances, such as became clear in the situation after the Bijlmer disaster, when people hung up on a railing handwritten letters, photos and other memento, before a committee arranged for an 'official' monument. There is a need for strange protrusions in the systematic urban landscape, for space for curious structures created by people who, although not professionally schooled, nevertheless have their own special passion. And most importantly: no one benefits from watered-down works resulting from compromises reached in negotiation with the artist. At any given stage in such concession making, the artist must have the nerve to say 'no' if a point is reached where the meaning of his work threatens insidiously to seep out of it.

Amsterdam's Zuidas is being developed by banks and project developers; it has an aura of solidity, reliability and luxury. From the beginning, art is being given its own *capsule* in the form of a mobile home, a space

designed by artists in which exhibitions can be held and plans conceived.

When I look at an artist's impression of the Amsterdam Arch and environs in the future heart of the Zuidas, one sentence buzzes around in my head like a fat fly: "You need art when you build a city" (De hele Zuidas een museum / 'The entire Zuidas: a museum', *NRC Handelsblad*, 25 October 2002). The Zuidas already looks 'swept clean.' It will not become a friendly place; it will not become a place for observing everyday life, nor one for small gestures. It exudes success and ambition; it is no place for losers. Such categories as trial, error and experimentation suddenly become dearer to one when confronted with this success-filled world.

Under the auspices of the Zuidas art committee, a competition took place for the best proposal for a work of art for the World Trade Centre, and that of Florian Göttke was selected. In his project, Göttke assigns a central role to the surveillance cameras. His idea is to project the images registered by these cameras onto a large wall in real time, alternating with short scenes played by actors. The plan is, however, not to be realised in this form, as the World Trade Center refuses to make the images from the cameras public. I.e.: what the visitor sees around him may not be projected onto the wall. Göttke was asked to consider altering his plan or transferring it to another location. I would argue for not adapting the work, but, rather, to give it a new lease of life as a 'shadow project.' It can function in another form, undiluted, and strengthened by virtue of the rejection, as a book, film, or lecture, or as an unrealised project in a magazine, and ultimately in people's minds.

All too often, the artist's original concept is, in fact, realised in the public space in watered-down and adjusted form. Works whose meaning is built up through observation and which add a fictitious element in order to get the system where it hurts whilst the conclusion is left up to the beholder, do not have much chance of being exhibited in the public space. A proposal such as that of Hans van Houwelingen to convert the KPN tower in the Zuidas into a colossal monument, this purely for artistic reasons, already has its unfeasibility built-in and consequently its effect can be compared to the stroke of a hammer. Once the Zuidas is complete, one could, in homage to these unique concepts, publish two catalogues: one in which, as customary, the works realised are presented, and one in which the unrealised projects are represented or displayed in all their glory, in order to preserve the role of the public space as an open stage for meanings.

Related posts:

1. [Wie een stad bouwt heeft kunst nodig](#)