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Trevivaldi

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If you enter the Vivaldi district, and thereby enter the South Axis, once you have passed the subway under the A10 motorway you come across six Nuon switchboxes. Previously hidden behind the motorway, little effort has been made to confer an aesthetic form on the whole. The switchboxes are rectangular with grey tiles. Here and there an enormous generator sticks out, which is why the complex is enclosed by a fence with impressive iron spikes. By transforming these switchboxes into a work of art, Krijn de Koning is trying to give the district the allure that the South Axis project bureau has in mind.

‘We wanted to create something spectacular in Vivaldi’, says Henk de Vroom, member of the South Axis art programme committee. ‘It is simply that an artist does not look at an environment in the same way as an architect. That is not a value judgement, but since we want to give the new district of the city an identity of its own, we consider the artist’s opinion to be important’. It is to be expected that, given the far-reaching ambitions of the project bureau, a local authority body responsible for the entire infrastructure and building on the South Axis, art must make an impact too. De Vroom refers to the Trevi Fountain and the Eiffel Tower to give an impression of what he has in mind. So the work that De Koning came up with is not the result of a commission that was simply placed in his hands. It was decided to further develop the procedures and constructions that led in the 1990s to the successful integration of art and urban development on the Oostelijke Eilanden docklands development in Amsterdam in order to achieve a special form of art. Once again it was important to involve the artists in the plans at an early stage, but the new feature was that this time visions were used. At the end of 2003 De Vroom invited the artists Hans van Houwelingen, Berend Strik and Krijn de Vroom to take part in a workshop, because their work reflects the city and its urban design. On the basis of a summary commission, in which the plan for the urban development around the KPN tower and the plan for the future sports accommodations were the focus of attention as specifically difficult areas, the artists were invited to think about what role art might play in the Vivaldi district (formerly Drenthepark).

No guarantee was given that one or more visions of these three artists would result in a definitive assignment. The most important thing was to create a situation in which art was a discussion partner at a high level. To this end, as many representatives as possible of institutions that are involved in the development of Vivaldi were invited to the workshop. ‘The artists were able to play power poker regarding the character to be conferred on the public space, and thus to concentrate on the artistic side’, remarks De Vroom. ‘Artists must make art, not work that fills up a space, work that has a social character, or work that merely decorates its surroundings’.

De Koning’s vision emerged after a thorough analysis of the entire Vivaldi terrain. He proposed stages of his own design, gravelled areas or lawns at various points that he considered suitable for art in order to create public areas that look welcoming. The fact that those sites were flexible and thus could be temporarily deployed on the continuously changing building site was particularly appreciated. To make the Nuon site open to the public too, he proposed building a stage on top of the switchboxes, and that resulted in a successive commission. De

Vroom: 'That idea convinced us that he was in the right place'. As the Nuon site is regularly used by tower cranes, it was impossible to build a stage, and De Koning was commissioned by the Nuon to make a new proposal for the site. The next difficulty is holding on to such a proposal with all its strengths and ideas in the urban development process. It is difficult, but as one of those responsible for art on the Oostelijke Eilanden, De Vroom is up to the job. 'As a programme committee we do not have any financial or political power, but we mediate as a small unit between all of the parties involved in the development of the South Axis. The keyword is cooperation. And a good organisation is essential too'. With the appointment of an art supervisor in the person of Simon den Hartog, the organisation is represented at the very highest levels. There is thus every reason to suppose that the ambitions of the programme committee to elevate art physically and economically to a higher plane will succeed.

That the vision of De Koning resulted in a successive assignment is viewed with favour by the others. 'He's a good artist', says Strik, 'but what he will be making is still ordinary art, isn't it?' Although Strik uses the same word as De Vroom, he means the opposite. The Nuon site was the main element in his vision, but it still has to be seen as a component in a larger whole. By implementing only here, a work is created that does not concentrate on the district, but forms a physically small part of it. It therefore closely resembles a traditional public work. The Nuon switchboxes were a problem right from the start, so Strik asks himself whether it was really necessary to formulate a vision for them first.

Admittedly, at first sight the visions of Strik and Van Houwelingen look more grandiose. Strik designed a square that included not only such typical urban features as a café and office boxes, but also a piece of nature in the form of trees and a lake. The whole radiates a paradisiacal atmosphere thanks to the three oversized flowers that he placed there. Strik's square is composed on the basis of the situation that he found when he joined the working group. In his search for an artistic climate that was already present, he charted the minimal facilities and street activities under headings like 'greenery', 'culture' and 'architecture'. In the plans for the new situation, he looked once again for spots where several of those elements converged and where he could add something as an artist. As an example of a low form of culture Strik mentions the Holiday Inn, a location that can become more magnetic when the area for drinking coffee that he has designed is placed next to it. It was when he thought about other forms of architecture that he came up with the idea of a café where all of those elements would be combined through a 24-hour programme. And although he was invited to develop that idea further, the final plan was not what the programme committee was looking for. In retrospect, the assignment required him to think of something that goes follows the movement of the development, preferably sums up all of the factors present, and reinforces them by means of an additional element. The square, a conversion point where all elements meet, emerged from the preference for a presentation that was clear above all else. 'It is a place where people meet, you rent an office box there, and while you are on the internet, someone brings you a cup of coffee from the café. If it rains you go and sit underneath a flower'. Strik tried to intensify the specific artistic climate that confers its identity on the entire district, which is why his plan is more than a well-conceived spatial vision.

Van Houwelingen designed a new KPN tower for the area. Plans to raise the existing tower – a necessity in order to stand out above the architecture that will surround it in the future – were already in the making. Why not immediately build a monument that 'at first sight is engraved in the memory and thereby acquires an international reputation, a crazy work of art which the formulation of the assignment calls for'?

Van Houwelingen is not bothered by the fact that his proposal was not implemented: 'That happens so often to me'. The difference with earlier projects is that he deliberately made an unrealistic proposal. This is due to the fact that the gigantic proportions of the object would have hindered air traffic to and from nearby Schiphol Airport, but even more because those same dimensions made it a utopia. Van Houwelingen explains his motives in his vision, entitled 'Art in the Drenthepark is a political decision'. He explains why, in spite of all the discussions and substantive debates that have been conducted in the Netherlands in the last few years, it is still the case that only a handful of public works of art have been a success, in the sense that they are critical,

meaningful, and improve the surroundings in which people live. As a result of their reticence and of the bureaucratic repression based on political and economic considerations, the parties with an interest in art in public space ensure that all the sharp edges of a work of art are removed. This vicious circle explains why public works of art are not really works of art at all because they are of no artistic interest. Because the level of ambition on the South Axis is so high, he saw it as an excellent opportunity to bolster his idea with a work that cannot be implemented as long as the political premises are not raised for discussion.

The commission to come up with a vision and thereby to provide the programme committee with various ways of getting to grips with locations where art in the widest sense of the world would be most likely to be successful, as well as with those conditions which would have to be fulfilled in order to give the architectural and urban development plans an artistic added value, actually yielded a number of more or less specific proposals. This was deliberate. Thus Strik welcomes the opportunity to make a planning analysis, but as an artist he also wants to see something implemented. Neither did De Koning ask himself how the locations that he had pinpointed might be treated by another artist. Van Houwelingen wanted to avoid only being able to speak in abstract terms. All the same, Van Houwelingen's tower, for instance, can also be seen as a conceptual model of how to deal with art, and Strik indicated that as far as he was concerned the elements brought together in the square could also have been scattered here and there. Whether the plans are clearly demarcated or not, what can be said at any rate is that the artists were all aiming at implementation with the specific nature of their visions. This is true of Van Houwelingen too, as can be seen from a less utopian second proposal that he submitted and which, like De Koning's, is based on the Nuon site. 'Perhaps it was too idealistic', De Vroom admits with hindsight, 'to ask artists to think up something without at the same time putting one of their own works on the table'. And because that work of their own was too close to the line of their oeuvres, and thus was not surprising enough for the programme committee, it was decided not to follow up any of the visions. De Koning's assignment should therefore be seen as a completely new assignment.

In his definitive proposal, De Koning has thus considerably altered his plans for the Nuon site. He has enlarged them too, resulting in an urban development concept. The new starting point is to leave the Nuon switchboxes as they are. By creating space around them, their specifically industrial character is emphasised. The black square that De Koning has in mind for that purpose does not just cover the Nuon site, but extends over the land of the local authority and the GVB to the south. The result is an enormous public area where the switchboxes become no more than a number of strange aesthetic objects.

But there is more to De Koning's plan than that. The 10 kv switchbox, a new station that the Nuon has to add because of the enormous consumption of energy on the South Axis, is partly designed by him in the bright colours that are so characteristic of his work. The waiting room for the GVB tram drivers will be replaced by an equally brightly coloured folly with a stage on top. Combined with a small park also designed by De Koning, these additions around the square are intended to confer a certain unity on the whole. De Koning took access for the public very seriously at every stage of his concept. 'I wanted to give the site, that has been hermetically closed for years, back to the people, the ideal situation would be if they could walk between the switchboxes'. The Nuon refused to remove its fences for security reasons. A black transparent fence became the alternative.

'I would have managed to get rid of those fences. At least, that's what I think'. Van Houwelingen admits that he sounds arrogant, but 'if you can convince the client that as an artist you have a clearer understanding of which work is suitable for which location, a lot of things turn out to be possible'. It is a tactic that brings results, as several of his works that have been implemented show. 'I'm not saying that forms of cooperation never work, and I believe in De Vroom's ambitions too. But because of their role as intermediaries, bodies like the programme committee are more prone to make compromises which the artist then has to accept. I react against them'. This difference of opinion shows clearly that the way in which art and architecture should be integrated is by no means fixed. The extent to which the artist can get something done, the role of the intermediaries, the extent to which large-scale commissions involve compromises – these are all issues on which opinions diverge

considerably.

All in all the programme committee has decided to treat working with visions as a one-off experiment. It did not yield anything surprising, but perhaps the irritations over the project also play a role among those involved. Two years later, feelings still run high. That began already with Van Houwelingen during the workshop. According to him, there were not enough people with knowledge and power present, so that there was no power poker going on. Moreover, his critical point of view, which was partly a result of this state of affairs, was not understood. At least, he received hardly any reactions to it. Strik too states that he expected too much from the cooperation in the workshop. Should these irritations be disregarded as jealousy because the visions of these artists were not followed up? By focusing on implementation rather than on a vision, the three artists viewed this procedure as a competition: Who gets the assignment? In their view, De Koning emerged as winner. This is not how the programme committee sees it, since it has stated that it will not implement any of the visions.

All the same, the irritations are understandable given the fact that the programme committee is not always consistent. The implementation of De Koning's work certainly is an implementation of his vision, albeit of a part of it. After all he came up with a result, in the form of a public area, for this specific site. And on the basis of the specific proposal with which he gave form to that result, the programme committee apparently considered De Koning the most able to create the definitive solution. Moreover, De Vroom claims to have found with this design that 'something' which the programme committee was looking for in principle. And in its present state it is also spectacular enough because it has now become an urban development concept. However, the problem remains that it still does not concentrate on the entire Vivaldi district. Moreover, the work fits seamlessly in with De Koning's oeuvre, while that was precisely the reason to turn down the other visions. It does not require much imagination to recognise De Koning's early floor sculpture in the square, and the fields of colour on the folly and the 10 kv switchbox are his trademark.

Will De Koning eventually satisfy the high expectations? Political premises or cultural identity, which played a part in the other two proposals, are of no importance in his case. De Koning based his work on the physical reality. He always does that, since everyone experiences that reality in roughly the same manner. In this way people do not see themselves as sought after or confronted by the individual expression of an artist. 'The Nuon switchboxes stand in a negative light in the present situation. I eliminate the judgements on them purely by making them visible and leaving them as they are'. So De Koning does not convert the grandeur that the programme committee has in mind literally into voluminous objects. The strength of his work, by contrast, lies in the space that he creates, the 'nothing'. And although this suggests an easy implementation, the opposite is true. De Vroom: 'We have moved mountains and cleared bears from the road in order to get the go ahead'. The difficult but unique aspect of De Koning's work is that his thoughts bore straight through the private ownership of the land. It is hardly surprising that the Nuon was immediately enthusiastic about his idea to allow the switchboxes, which are exceptionally ugly in their present state, to become a part of a work of art. De Vroom proves his capacities as an intermediary by convincing the local authority and the GVB to join in too, and in getting the three institutions to finance the work. But even then there is no question of an easy implementation. Work on the new 10 kv switchbox started recently, but the entire project will take at least ten years. Still, the result will be worth it: something that can be called aesthetic and that has an element of daring too because it concerns the Nuon switchboxes. For who is bold enough to take these buildings, by far the ugliest part of the South Axis, as a starting point for a Trevi Fountain?

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