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At the end of the eighties a period begins in the Netherlands of a critical attitude towards planning, urban design, architecture, open space planning, street furniture, infrastructure and art in public space.

Architecture is booming but deemed superficial. Architects seem to be interested more in new forms than in developing an understanding of architecture and space. Architects and clients have too casual an attitude when thinking about the design and placement of buildings in their relationship to other aspects of public space. The rise of theoretical intellectualism and the promotion of a philosophical 'discours' in architecture did not lead to an increase in imaginative projects. In commercial centres buildings mirror each other and form part of the anonymization of business. Personal expression is no more appreciated. Difference is established through design, while at the same time the buildings stay fearfully close to each other.

Because facades determine the edge of the public space they are influential in the question whether, and if so, how, this space is experienced. The necessity was felt to call on the responsibility of the architect and the patron. The same goes for the planners and designers that program the public space on the basis of political decision-making. Streets are divided in lanes for cars, bicycles, public transportation and parking spaces. All that rests is a small sidewalk on the edge. Squares are given up for traffic purposes. Because every little piece of the street has its specific purpose it is filled with a profusion of signs. A proliferation of white lines, colored concrete, traffic-signs, anti-parking posts, street furniture, recycling containers, and a rampant growth of advertising signs make it impossible to experience what is supposedly left of the remaining space. A visual pollution has come into being that brings about superficiality and disrespect.

Landscaping seemed to be degenerated into a forgotten and unexploited discipline. As far as the design of urban space is concerned greenery has become a matter of filling up restspace. Everywhere we encounter the same, anonymous greenery-green. Street furniture is often without character, poor and badly placed. It radiates boredom. The surfacing and the pavement materials are chosen without care. Drawingboard thinking seems to have ruled out craftsmanship in detailing. In order to execute the design cutting and patching is necessary.

Public space has become a sort of private realm where no one feels at home and every one seems to look for the host. Could it be that the host is this sculpture looking up suddenly, partly hidden by the street furniture, papered over by advertising messages or, quite on the contrary, of an overriding presence but for its clumsy appearance, balancing now on this leg, then on the other? Even with the best of intentions it is impossible to understand why this sculptural host with his frozen and clumsy manners is standing precisely here.

In the case of public art imagination, pre-eminently the domain of art, commonly stops short for the principal's wish to have the artwork function as a signal or marker. As long as the artwork does not intermingle with his building, the architect for example would not mind to have on top of his building a neon artwork flashing on and off, preferably something cheerful and with a critical message. The design carries this famous white spot, indicating the possibility of a sculpture, for instance in the shape of 'a vertical element in the spatial concept'. Little by little the plastic vocabulary of art in public space has become a specialism that is considered as applied art by the rest of the artworld. Original and innovatory art concepts are changed into something esthetic, suiting a monumental vocabulary. This undesirable situation has also come into being because of the anonymity of



Inner court of Bruno Albert's block, with gate by Narcisse Tordoir

decision procedures in which the different parties (artist, advisory committee, principal, architect) look for a solution that satisfies all. The result is like diluted wine. In the end little is left of the initial power of the original autonomic meaning.

Adding art from zero

Because of the critical attitude of a number of inspiring persons from the world of art and architecture, the Municipal Housing Department, the Municipal Planning Department, the Committee for Public Art (advising the elderman for art affairs) and some developers, like the Housing Corporations Het Oosten and Lieven de Key, Foundation for Housing De Doelen, Moes Construction Firm, Building Fund of Dutch Municipalities (Bouwfonds Nederlandse Gemeenten), Social Fund of the Building Industry (Sociaal Fonds Bouwnijverheid), the Zeeburg District and the Eastern Harbour Area Office for Project Management, a strong motivation manifested itself to involve the functional side with the artful side of architecture and design, also in coherence with the visual arts, when developing a planning area or building project. In order not to just end up with something theoretical or utopian, some planning areas and building projects were selected. By involving artists in their design process and realization practical experience might be gained as to the actual significance of art. In 1988 the Committee for Public Art took the initiative to form the Werkverband Kunst-IJ-As, a working committee or 'taskforce' for public art along the axis of the Y river. Urban planning, architecture, the visual arts and art theory were brought together with the project management and the private investors, the whole being chaired by an independent chairman. The direct impetus came from the City Council wanting to redevelop the old harbour areas along the Y, with the area around the Central Station as nucleus. Their aim was to create a new urban environment for high-quality living and working, much like the waterfronts in other big harbour cities.

The Committee for Public Art acknowledged the fact that the existing policy tools and working committees, consisting only of artists, might not be effective enough to achieve the desired level. In actual practice the separation of, and distance between, urban planning, architecture and design on one hand and the visual arts on the other often proves to be too big. Building and visual arts have opposite horizons. By joining the disciplines and parties in one taskforce the mutual involvement might be strengthened. New critical viewpoints could be examined with regard to each other and in relation to actual practice.

At the end of 1988 the elderman for art affairs invited highly qualified people from all the parties involved to become member of the Y-Axis Art Taskforce, so assuring short lines of communication and ad hoc connections when needed. Their assignment is to examine the significance of involving art in the development of the areas along the proposed Y-axis, to set objectives, to develop these in small and expedient teams with regard to their application in the respective areas, and for the Taskforce in general to be a coordinating and connecting intermediary.

Contrary to common practice art was not to be involved when all was well and done, as some added value. It was clear from the start that art had to be engaged from the very beginning, on a theoretical as well as creative level. At such an early stage, zero point, it is not necessary that an artist starts making art. The main thing is that art is involved from nought in looking, listening and thinking along and presenting views, in order to develop for art an appropriate position from which it can contribute to the development of the planning area. This way an apt connection with art can be realized in a clear manner, because again art will be manifold, also in a theoretical and creative sense. The found

link with the visual arts guides the selection of an artist. So far bringing in art is an artistic determination of where and how it can contribute both to a new urban design and the development of an art concept that ties in with the urbanistic and architectural points of view. Basically then the artist directs like a *régisseur*, in the mean time being a creative and independent ambassador of art. Because the different disciplines, including art, are brought together as early as possible they are in a position to react to each other from zero point in the design stage. They will also be better attuned, and geared to one another, before the actual building takes place.

The Y-Axis Art Taskforce has two objectives. First, art contributes to the design of the planning area. Second, the art involved contributes to the development of the visual arts in general. The Taskforce does not want a blending of disciplines, but an integration through concerted action. In an urbanistic, architectural, spatial, designing or artistic sense nothing in the planning area will be developed or built by itself.

Pending political decision making the Taskforce was granted an unofficial status on January 1, 1989. Up till today this situation has remained, due to political developments related to the Central Station area. On account of the many activities of the Taskforce, it might at present be justly called an 'invisible reality'.

The KNSM Island

One of the areas covered by the Y-axis is the KNSM Island. It is a peninsula laid out in the most north-eastern part of the port of Amsterdam. It owes its name to the Koninklijke Nederlandsche Stoomboot Maatschappij – the Royal Dutch Steamboat Company –, who got the exclusive exploitation rights in 1902. The shipping activities were mainly with the former Dutch East Indies, which now form Indonesia. Till well into the sixties the island was a place of exotic imports and the arrival and departure of Indonesia travellers.

When the KNSM ended its activities in the seventies, the buildings got occupied by squatters or were rented out to artists by the Port Authority. Art exhibitions and manifestations were held by the underground scene, attracting large groups of interested visitors. Living in old vehicles, caravans, selfmade contraptions and converted ships city nomads realized a different way of dwelling, without rules. Smallscale enterprises were started. At the end of the eighties the City Council decided to eradicate this nomad city. The area was singled out for housing.

The patron – municipality, developers and housing corporations – asked Jo Coenen to work out the building program prepared by the Planning Department, and in particular to develop guidelines for an optimal synthesis of structural layout, public space and real estate – urbanism and architecture. Attention had to be paid to an architectural coherence between the parts for social housing and those for subsidized leasing and owner occupied property. Also to be guarded were the quality of public space, the articulation of the blocks with regard to existing buildings that were to remain – Loods 6, Canteen building and Levantkade 8 – and to the sun orientation of the dwellings. Nothing was said about orientation to the prevailing winds. Neither the role of art, nor the intrinsic meaning of space were mentioned in the program. The program was specific though in its demand for well-cared-for public space, but the concern was mainly with proper use, especially with regard to parking.

Early in 1989 Jo Coenen's design was already in an advanced phase. The parts to be built first were already worked out by the selected architects. The urban design stressed the architecture. The island was to be furnished with large, massive and closed blocks. Although the developments went against the conviction held by the Y-Axis Art Taskforce to have art contribute from the start and to

choose artist and urban designer simultaneously on the basis of an intrinsic program shared by both, the Taskforce could not do anything but trying to get involved in the process as it was going along. One of the objectives of the Taskforce – the integration of architecture and visual arts – could nonetheless be put into practice. In this too advanced phase the Taskforce sought an alliance with architecture for the integration of art.

Jo Coenen's dominantly large blocks, six floors high, measuring about 170 by 60 meters and standing on the southern side of the island, turned out to be each other's opposites. The patron of the eastern block, Housing Corporation Het Oosten, had chosen Bruno Albert from Liege to be its architect. The Berlin based architect Hans Kollhoff was chosen by Housing Foundation De Doelen to do the western block. Now the role of the patron is also visible, together with the powers exerted by municipal supervisor Tjeerd Dijkstra and the urban designer. In their finished state the two adjoining blocks appear as a solidification in stone of architectural debate.

At the end of the twentieth century one still moment of this debate has been created and made readable by the principals. The visual arts break into the debate, by remaining independent and imaginative within this context, in the meantime changing the discourse in order to point out the relation between urbanism, architecture and art. The Taskforce regarded Bruno Albert's work typical of an international movement striving for a renewed interpretation of classic, almost archetypical schemes. The architecture of Bruno Albert is characterized by a pursued detailing, complexity, rhythm and variety. Hans Kollhoff on the other hand is in search of a synthesis between concept and materialization. Apart from being functional his architecture expresses independent thinking on architecture, craft and material. Central to his concept is the idea of megaform. The oeuvre of the Antwerp artist Narcisse Tordoir can be described with keywords like openness, rhythm and abstracting. The Taskforce considered his work as being complementary to the work of Bruno Albert. The appearance of Tordoir's work is characterized by the manifold use of pictograms and basic symbols, each shown on its own panel or picture ground but mounted together to make a larger whole. The handling and choice of image and content, visual language and colour, text and humor induces his work with a typical relationship on its own terms with the oeuvre of René Magritte.

Arno van der Mark's balanced relation to the concept of art corresponds with Kollhoff's understanding of architecture. They enlarge the notion of their discipline instead of confirming it. As was the case with Narcisse Tordoir no preconceived views or conditions existed, quite contrary to common practice in public art. In dialogue with each other the artist and the Taskforce formulate the assignment and proceed with the actual work. Exactly because of the absence of standard expectations and wishes Arno van der Mark considered the assignment an ideal opportunity to specify his ideas about art and the functioning of art. His proposal consists of four elements: marking what is left of the building Levantkade 8; an arcade with images; a memento mori in an existing pond opposite the head of the building where the arcade is projected; and a doorhandle engraved with the German word Ort. The process of development took six years, and only the arcade – or passage – has been executed. Both artists have shown to be able to make a meaningful contribution to the design of the new urban environment. In the meantime their works make a valuable contribution to the development of the arts. Which means that a number of objectives of the Y-Axis Art Taskforce have been met. Reality showed the way. Without the teamwork by all participants, on a basis of trust and enthusiasm, organized and guided with respect to content by the

Taskforce, none of these artworks would exist. When looking back it cannot be perceived anymore that the artists joined the process halfway.

The works of art by Narcisse Tordoir and Arno van der Mark seem to be generated from the desired zero point indeed. This makes even more special the fact that they have shown to be able to make visual art with its autonomous value an inextricable and essential factor in the architectural context, without losing strength artistically. It is not a repetition or display of previous work. These artists enriched the city of Amsterdam and their own body of work with new specimens of art.

Art within sight

In our urban environment art could have the same lasting presence as the Trevi fountain in Rome. It charges patron and artist with a good deal of commitment and responsibility. Art is not tactful. Solutions are not reached easily or in a selfpossessed manner. Art is independent. In an urban or architectural surrounding art may exemplify in a material sense this context by being involved. Probably this is why art is invited. Within or outside the boundaries of society and beyond conventions art achieves form, meaning and image. Regarding art as something special does not imply that we can do without or that we can decide on where and when freely. Art is a visible expression of the aspirations and convictions held by a society. It deserves to be in sight, in the streets and in architecture. It is not for museum or gallery only. An interesting, not to say conspicuous, development would be if a principal would have the courage to first formulate his intentions, then select an artist, and have the artist choose the architect. It is not a new idea. Especially in the Renaissance it was not an uncommon practice. The reason? It is the visual arts that are capable of making essence visible and shaping our notion of space, in two and in three dimensions – not to forget the meaning of light. In the course of time this situation has been reversed. Duly or unduly? We have to feel up to this discourse. When in the Renaissance a patron chose artists like Bernini or Michelangelo, they in turn decided on the choice of architects, selecting those who could be expected to build spatial meaning. Art is not necessarily to come first, but it should come together with a new urban plan or building project from the start. Because art has a significant value.