

WORK TO DO

We can't talk about the future of a city without talking about its past and present. Moments of departure and arrival are crucial. They are moments in time and space, formative moments, ones that produce the conditions for the further development of a life; of the things that you overcome, or seem to overcome, the things that happen to you, that you let happen or made sure they happened. Moments that have a close relationship to a very specific personal time, experience and location. Moments that inscribe, establishing themselves, not only in the architecture of a city, but also in that other architecture, the personal building, the one we call the individual. The psychology of a city and its people are inextricably linked.

Speaking about the future of Rotterdam begins with speaking about our own experiences. Our current artistic practice has its roots in the time when we arrived in Rotterdam. If Rotterdam was not the city it is, then the focus of our practice – the importance of public space in a democratic society – would have developed very differently.

I

In 1979 the art magazine *Artforum* conducted a survey in New York asking artists about their opinions and experiences of changes in their audience. After the dust had settled from many years of the SoHo effect (1), which grew to almost mythical proportions, it became clear that the public and the public interest in art had become an important issue. Institutions and galleries began wondering who their audience really was, where were they going if they weren't going to the museum, why didn't they go, and what were the consequences for the continued existence of those institutions and artists?

The American artist Vito Acconci identified two options for the art space. It can be used as a language, as a carrier of meaning comparable to a book, or it can serve as a space where art appears. A space where art is created while someone looks: the (relevant) audience often being the art scene itself. For Acconci, the art space was a meeting point, a place where communities can be formed, where communities can be called to order, or brought together for a special purpose (2). This comes close to what we understand as the 'public sphere' or 'public domain'. The establishment of a community law arises from physical meeting, shared experience, and a shared excitement for the special and the specific. Art can function as a ruse, as a pre-text for groups of spectators and participants to convene and enthusiastically share experiences. These moments are precarious, but when they do come about it suddenly creates a horizon of possibilities, a realization that anything can change, that there really is something that can be built.

II

We arrived in Rotterdam in 1981. We were neither born nor raised in the city, and until we went to the art school we had no reason to visit. It was a big shock. There was nothing but poverty and neglect. The center was in decline, there was no student life, the station was a refuge for the lost and homeless, and prostitutes solicited on our doorstep. There was little cultural life, at least not much more than a little: the old Schouwburg theater (built from stones salvaged from the rubble of Second World War bombing) and De Doelen concert hall were there, as were Lantaren Venster and the Boijmans Van Beuningen Museum. There were a few nice cafes, especially around the Binnenweg. The Citta, where a very old DJ used to play; Heavy, which soon closed because of drugs; Dizzy and Sjaan with its burly bar women where one night a man started brandishing a gun demanding a beer because he thought the service was too slow. On the Oude Binnenweg was Galerie Het Venster (The Window Gallery), a highlight of Rotterdam and the Netherlands. The International Film Festival still took place in Lantaren Venster and despite its small size provided a provocative insight into

what the opportunities and challenges can be in this hard, windy city, and which every year still leaves a large gaping hole of loss and longing behind. So, what do you do?

(iii)

Reflecting on the lack of an artistic climate in Rotterdam, Wim Beeren, the former director of Boijmans Van Beuningen Museum, said during the opening of an exhibition by the *Hard Werken* design collective "There are no good artists in Rotterdam". As an exhibition location, Rotterdam artists didn't expect much of the museum, so we left it behind and generated our own opportunities and visibility by creating exhibition platforms, workplaces, and by organising artist-initiatives (foundations started by artists) in the many vacant school buildings, warehouses, offices and retail units. We discovered that the line between city government and the artists and residents of the city, was remarkably short and direct. The cooperation was practical and the city was benevolent. Squatting wasn't necessary. The city gladly loaned spaces knowing that a group of artists in a neighbourhood generated something that the city by itself could not: a state of optimism, excitement and change. Thus the sluggishness of urban development was an advantage: the town was our playground, and the urban fabric was a wave on which we surfed. Rotterdam was a city we could turn into something we found exciting and worthwhile. All of these activities created a network of connections and contacts, both in Rotterdam and around the world. The artist-initiatives (foundations started by artists) began guest studios programs, many artists came to Rotterdam, and from this many collaborations and exchanges began. All this did not go unnoticed. All this energy and activity was not only interesting for us. Everyone – artists, designers, architects, curators, writers and also the international art world – suddenly came to Rotterdam to be here, to live, to work, to consume. Rotterdam was *the place to be*. Through this gathering of the various local, national and international (art) worlds, Rotterdam's artists also became visible. The world became bigger than Rotterdam.

This do-it-yourself dynamic coincided with major developments for the city at an institutional level. Up until the mid-80s Rotterdam was preoccupied with redevelopment, and now it was pulling out all the stops to make itself into a 'real' city. A cultural heart was deemed indispensable and the city fulfilled this with a determined and dynamic ambition. The Schouwberg, Kunsthal, NAI, Witte de With, TENT and V2 were all quickly established or lured from elsewhere. A more varied and intensive city life followed at the same nimble pace. The image of Rotterdam as a city where nobody voluntarily wanted to be was recast in the 90s culminating in "Rotterdam Cultural Capital" in 2001. However, the tide quickly turned, partly due to the events of 9/11, and the political upheaval caused by the rise and assassination of the politician Pim Fortuyn. The city, lead and developed for more than 50 years by a city council that was essentially socialist, was suddenly populist and the pressure put on the *visibility* of art was exaggerated by the politicians.

We doubt political developments were the sole cause of the declining enthusiasm for Rotterdam. We think the city went too far in the institutionalisation of creative energy. "Establish a foundation, call in an advisory board, formulate your objectives, apply for a subsidy and get to work," seemed to be the adage of the time. And so the pioneer was forced to formalise, while any attempt to institutionalise and control any undefined energy lead to nothing other than stagnation. If an experiment becomes just a suit worn for show, thus avoiding any actual risks, then the energy behind the initiative disappears. When the municipality, through its advisory board that annually reviews the activity of institutions founded and maintained by public funds, surprisingly discovers that not much of the 90s vitality is left, then you wonder if the above model of cultural planning is being too crudely deployed. Beautiful new spaces may well attract visitors, but they don't create a vital cultural climate. So, what do they create?

IV

We propose a new venture for Rotterdam, nothing less than a complete revision of thinking about the city as an economic and social entity, through the use of its main assets: space as *open source* and users as prosumers (3), active, entrepreneurial and independent. As the resident of a city, you are truly its co-owner and part of a community.

In Rotterdam there is more than sufficient space in the sheer number of vacant square meters of office space, the shifting of the harbour out of the city, the moving of the city's cultural institutions to the South and the relocation of residents from areas needing redevelopment. However this has a knock on effect, because how far can a city council, its advisors and planners go in the *top-down* reorganisation of urban space? How much critical mass must a city have at its disposal in order not to fall into unbearable emptiness? If the capital of a city consists of the economic relationship between space and users, how can this be capitalised upon? These questions are crucial, because the capital of Rotterdam has no obvious economic value comparable to historic cities such as Amsterdam. There really should be many different and more urgent reasons to want to be in Rotterdam other than you can't leave.

In fact, it has always been in the city's nature to appeal to initiative because there is so much vacant, unfilled space. The city's failure is also its success. This blank canvas generates a social and economic interaction rooted in the dynamics of informal and formal exchanges. Instability activates, but this needs to be recognised.

Currently, many spaces are removed from urban life, spaces that are managed by administrators such as anti-squat letting agents (agents who are encouraged to inhabit empty properties with the blessing of local councils, housing associations and developers). Space has become much less of a tool to experiment with. This is counterproductive to Rotterdam, because the city is the big loser: if everything is pinned down by commercial motives, regulation and avoiding risks, the city loses its attraction. Nothing is possible: no improvisation, no experiment. Life becomes businesslike and monotonous. It leads, via the wallet, to large losses in other crucial areas, those of the creative and the humane, which form the basis for the sparkle a city desperately needs.

Interestingly, the city is well aware that it can experiment with space. The municipality deliberately uses space to solve problems, and as an instrument to start and to force through development, as seen in the events relating to *De Rotterdam*. The municipal services currently located in the Marconi Towers shall be moving to *De Rotterdam* on the Wilhelminapier, where a new part of the city is arising. Had the municipality not made the decision to move, then the building, designed by Rem Koolhaas, might have been scrapped due to the anticipated un-let vacancies. The city council is keen to make this new piece of city a success and energetically fill this economic gap by being a guarantor for a very large percentage of the building's total occupancy. History repeats itself here; the Marconi Towers stood empty for a long time after their completion on Rotterdam's western outskirts, then the municipality intervened by similarly bringing the very same local services under one roof (4). Apparently the market does not always work as desired: the municipality is regulating things that, following its own creed, should be left to free market dynamics.

V

Rotterdam must develop a positive and productive idea of the temporal and transient. This requires a change in mentality and is urgent. Because, what do permanently vacant buildings and a feeling of displacement do for inhabitants and their experience of the city? What makes a city interesting for both its residents and visitors, if its charm is not so obvious? The recent crisis largely caused by the real estate speculation of banks and insurers (and whose traces are evidenced in Rotterdam's

huge vacancy rate) shows that these models of project development and economic progress have failed. We have to let go of these old models. They don't work, and certainly not in Rotterdam. Apart from space, the city's only capital is the will of its people, and if they're chased away they'll never come back. And then you're left empty-handed. A new economic model, as we see it, can be based on developing a different relationship between the 'public' and 'space'. This shrinking city has nothing to lose and must seize the chance to make itself a testing ground. The time is right for this.

Maybe we can experiment with space similar to the way a company like Google capitalizes information. Google's mission "to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful" is simply astounding: they give information away for free and so not only do they create a convenient search engine for a growing global Internet community, but also a huge amount of companies and organizations want to commit to Google because they want to be seen by its users. As such, Google's other slogan, "do not be evil" should be paramount.

An economic model based on providing space as an engine for cultural activity is comparable to the way open source works. Just like an open source network, culture (and the space it occupies) exhibits what is called a 'strong indirect network effect' (5): the value of a system depends, to some extent, on participation, that is, on the amount of requests it can handle. At the same time, the value of an application increases if it is running on a popular operating system. A network becomes increasingly valuable as more people participate, this creates an intense clustering, which in turn generates a positive feedback. Intense participation also creates a network of competitors, all contributing to improving the system, and so on. In a kind of centrifugal force, open source generates increasing amounts of activity. The advantages are many, the property slump and its inevitable impoverishment disappear, allowing more people and businesses to engage with the city. As a byproduct a vibrant cultural climate emerges, largely financed by the value of its own resources, and through which the regular property market of offices and business premises can again begin to improve. The city continues to earn with this 'give away model', because it generates an attractive climate and thus an improving market, and this simply generates more revenue.

The only salvation for Rotterdam is to dare to be undefined and recognize that its strength and appeal lies in the exploitation and exploration of the non-definitive. Alive and itinerant, elusive but also relentless. The city must be provisional again. Communities should be able to form themselves organically and break up naturally. The city must perceive itself as a *prepared accident* (6). It's about expanding upon and setting out exciting configurations, which are sometimes separate, sometimes destructive and at other times seemingly stable.

Bik Van der Pol, New York, April 2011

1 Named after the urban development, or gentrification, in New York's SoHo neighborhood where in the 70s artists converted small factories and warehouses into lofts etc. Ironically enough, this contributed to the district's transformation and upgrading into a now popular and expensive tourist destination.

2 Molly Nesbit in Artforum, April 2003: 'Bright lights, big city: the '80s without walls'

3 *Prosumer* is a contraction of the word professional or producer with the word consumer. The term has multiple and conflicting meanings: the business sector sees the prosumer (professional consumer) as a market with a passive role, while

economists see the prosumer (producer and consumer) as more independent of the mainstream economy: someone who is involved in a process gets and takes an active role.

4 A brief explanation of the history: during the construction of Europoint II and III the property market collapsed and the Marconi Towers stood empty for some time. In 1976 the municipality bought the towers for 131 million guilders and located the City-planning and Housing department, and the urban services there. Construction of a new town hall was therefore canceled. Coincidentally, in 2009 Rem Koolhaas won a competition to build new town hall offices.

5 A network effect is the effect a user of a product or service has on the value of that product to other people. When the network effect is present, the value of a product or service increases as more people use it.

6 Architect Cedric Price talks about the paradox of the *prepared accident*, whereby the strategy of very precise planning is put in place not only to create coincidence, serendipity, and accident but also to promote them. Price already integrated early theoretical models of computer and communication technology in his work, always encountering the same dilemma of how to encourage participation without having to impose it. See: *Calculated Uncertainty: Computers, Chance Encounters, and "Community" in the Work of Cedric Price* by Rowan Wilken *Transformations*, Issue No. 14 March 2007, *Accidental Environments*.