

NEW TOWNS AND POLITICS?

A PLEA FOR POLITICAL UNCORRECTNESS? OR THE ARTIST AS LOBBYIST, EVEN ACTIVIST

Jacqueline Heerema, mei 2010

As conceptual artist and urban curator I notice that more and more my work gets involved in politics. A lot of projects are developed topdown with pre-defined frameworks based on questionable assumptions. I think art has a role in disrupting fixed notions.

Even Rembrandt painted on assignment while actually dealing with the concept 'light'.

I had to deal with my own presumption 'that new towns are just average white middle class suburbs' when I did a work at Ypenburg, The Hague. I realised that from my origin in The Hague South West (a post -2nd worldwar extension of the city) I could learn something: in the sixties when I grew up there were cellars all over with experimental bands like Q65: (underground) music as a way to express a new attitude to living and thinking by a young generation growing up in an overregulated environment. Every generation has their own dreams and Ypenburg was still a young suburb when I worked there (2002), so I mostly noticed the huge collection of fashionable cleaning devices in the homes I visited, like a tribute to a 'new, fresh and unspoiled (or untainted)' start people want to make in their new surroundings. I am not surprised that in the latest elections the PVV came out strongest in these areas.

I mostly focus on these presumptions and assumptions, they are my inspiration.

Dealing with (sub)urban projects (on assignment or own initiative) I notice that my social engagement as an artist has become incorporated as a device for policymakers and is now transformed into the fashionable 'community arts'.

There is however a great difference from the point of view from the arts as from - for instance - welfare. Art is not meant to 'do good' or make people 'feel better', it is meant to be curious, open minded and reflect on society and the way we deal with culture.

A 'community picnic' may be part of this process of unravelling what lies underneath, but is a tool, it is not art. I notice a friction in these goals.

There is an 'official' interest in involving 'people' in strategies of transition, not only in urban transition, but also in other fields, like musea and art itself. It seems like we all have to focus on the social relevance of what we do, for instance to be able to get funding.

But it is tricky. It leans to political correctness.

I'll give some examples from my artpractice:

1. MUSEUM OOSTWIJK

A lot of artprojects evolve from transition projects: a neighborhood will be subject to large scale development (renovation, demolition and construction) and subsequently funding becomes available for artprojects.

In 2002 I was selected to develop a concept for a 'nice' neighborhood in Vlaardingen (Oostwijk), a living area (10.000 inhabitants) that was not subject to a transition process, and therefore 'should' not - under the current unwritten rules - be subject to special funding for an artproject (like when you behave badly you get all the attention). It gave me the beautiful opportunity to study an area where people really **like** to live, and problems (if there are any) are personal and not collective. In collaboration with the inhabitants I transformed the area into a living museum, where the role of public and museum is reversed. In Museum Oostwijk individuals themselves define their contribution to contemporary culture. It evolved from the concept that everybody is a director of his own personal archive at home and expresses culture by being part of culture. The collection of Museum Oostwijk consisted of everything and everybody in that neighborhood, like houses, cars, pets, memories and dreams and became subject for study and

projects for seven years (2002-2009). As a result I got invited to give lectures and classes in museums and to students museology.

2. WONDERKAMER VAN ZOETERMEER/ROOM OF MARVELS

In 2008 I was invited by the Stadsmuseum Zoetermeer. The museum had already started a project called 'Thuis in Zoetermeer' (At home in Zoetermeer). The museum started the 'Collection Zoetermeer 2008', gathered by donations of objects and stories of residents of Zoetermeer that represent their 'feeling of being at home in Zoetermeer'.

My assignment was to define what could be the meaning of this collection for the museum, the residents and the town.

I started the project as a quest: 'can residents be a valuable source of knowledge and thus contribute to the perception of their city?' I developed an interactive program 'De Wonderkamer van Zoetermeer' (Room of Marvels, 2009) which consisted of a series of public workshops, masterclasses and a final debate about the relevance and value of these objects and stories. With residents as local experts and artists and scientists as external experts we critically investigated this relevance. The catalogue of the project - called '4289' - was sent to all museums and heritage organisations in the Netherlands as inspiration.

One of the discoveries I made during the process was that in Zoetermeer a very specific interpretation consists of the terms 'autochtoon en allochtoon'. 'Autochtoon' means that you were born and raised in Zoetermeer, and refers to the approximately 9000 inhabitants that lived around 1960 in Zoetermeer. After 1960 Zoetermeer developed as a New Town. 'Allochtoon' are all newcomers since 1960: all approximately 111,000 residents who have settled since 1960 in New Town Zoetermeer. Was the 'Room of Marvels' really about assimilation or rejection between 'Dutchmen' themselves? As a parallel to 'Fort Europe', did there exist a 'Fort Zoetermeer'? In my opinion the social history of pioneers of New Towns should be subject of research and become relevant to new developments concerning New Towns.

More recently I have been approached for projects in urban areas that are on the 'Vogelaarlijst'. As I already stated I was born and raised in The Hague South West (number 47 on the Vogelaarlijst) and experienced the development of a white middle class suburbia into a place for resettlement for drifting residents of the Schilderwijk, in the wake of urban renewal in de Schilderswijk in the eighties. With that transformation environmental stress was introduced. And a lot of public spaces were turned into private spaces: public gardens were fenced in and once open entrances to buildings were closed.

3. KOLENKIT

Very recently I proposed a concept for de Kolenkit Amsterdam (number 1 at the Vogelaarlijst - 'the worst suburb in the Netherlands'). In the description of the assignment was stated that the proposal should deal with the scientific notion that 'Feeling at home is prior to social cohesion and a livable neighborhood' ('Thuisgevoel draagt bij aan sociale cohesie en een leefbare buurt'). Remarkable, in an area where 80% of the inhabitants origin from elsewhere. Moreover, the project centered around a few Piggelmeewoningen, which in the Kolenkit area are expected to be re-used, while at the same street but on the other side of the highway the same houses are demolished. My concept centered around questions dealing with these assumptions and presuppositions, even before a research could be started in that area. My approach was not selected.

4. POELENBURG BOUWT POELENBURG/RESIDENTS BUILD THEIR FUTURE LIVING ENVIRONMENT

At the same time I work on a project in Poelenburg/Zaanstad (number 18 on the Vogelaarlijst). For this area a transitionproject is in process that involves a period of 8 years of renovation, demolition and construction.

Here I was asked to develop a project centred around the economy in the area. Interesting, because vulnerable areas tend to develop a strong informal economy that is based on informal networks, and research in the Bijlmer (Amsterdam) shows that transition periods damage these networks and therefore the informal economy.

I slowly realised that a lot of people make a good living out of Vogelaarwijken, doing research and projects while one of the problems is the unemployment of its residents. I started by asking: 'what will happen if a part of the building project is built by the neighborhood itself?' For instance all the window frames that are necessary during the 8 years of constructing?

This concept I call 'Poelenburg bouwt Poelenburg' (residents build their future living environment) Residents gain profit by growing in personal capabilities (income, work experience, social context, self-esteem etc), and the actual realization of aspects in their immediate surroundings can create a greater involvement in that environment. At this point in the project a lot of people cooperate in developing this concept. We benefit from the fact that we insert early into the process of planning to developing and construction. Opportunities lie in the field of building and public space. It requires commitment from both municipality (politics) and the three relevant housing cooperatives, as well as the residents, organizations and businesses, potential developers, architects and/or product developers and builders. If consensus is reached, it can become part of the negotiations with builders and architects.

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