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Tussenmeer
A Street in the Postwar City

At first sight, Amsterdam's Nieuw-West district appears to be little more than a uniform – and therefore unexciting – system of streets and buildings. But if you look at the street plan of the Western Garden Cities, you find that the opposite is true. The streets show a clear pattern of main roads running roughly north-south and east-west, connected by secondary roads, with blocks of buildings clustered together. In the street plan, these roads and blocks combine to create ornamental patterns – varying from grid-like patterns to ones involving Z-shaped blocks – punctuated by a number of special elements, such as the Osdorpplein shopping centre and the Sloterplas lake. This raises the question of why Nieuw-West seems to have so little spatial variety and energy at the street level.

'Think of a city and what comes to mind? Its streets. If a city's streets look interesting, the city looks interesting; if they look dull, the city looks dull,' Jane Jacobs wrote in her book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*.[1] Is one's first impression of Nieuw-West determined mainly by the look of its streets, by their 'interesting' or 'vibrant' appearance? Countless examples from literature, such as travel stories and poetic descriptions of cities, confirm the view that a city's streets define its personality. For instance, in Heinrich Heine's *Briefe aus Berlin* (1822), street life is central to Berlin's image. Furthermore, various critics have regarded the street as a space symbolic of the city, urban life, or even society as a whole. A case in point is Walter Benjamin's critique of Hausmann's boulevards in his *Passagenwerk*.[2]

The street in urbanist discourse

Accordingly, in the discourse of urban design in the early twentieth century, it was the streets that had to be altered or eliminated entirely, as if they were vestiges of the past.[3] This position was endorsed for various reasons. Antonio Sant'Elia and Filippo Tommaso

Marinetti said that modern people could no longer 'live in the same streets built for their own needs by the men of four, five, six centuries ago',[4] a claim that should be seen in the light of their fascination with the tremendous rate of technological change.

The architects of the Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM) criticised the city primarily for its chaos, density and lack of clear structure. As Le Corbusier wrote in *Vers une Architecture* (1923): 'It is time to repudiate the present layout of our cities in which aparment buildings pile up, all crammed together, and narrow streets interweave, full of noise, gasoline, stench, and dust, and where the floors are completely open to inhaling this filth. Large cities have become too dense for the safety of their inhabitants and yet they are not dense enough'.[5] At the fourth CIAM conference in 1933, during the presidency of the Dutch architect Cornelis van Eesteren, this critical view gave rise to principles for the 'functional city', in which the functions of dwelling, work, recreation, and transport would be clearly separated. This perspective on the city reduced the street – which had played an important emblematic or poetic role in the nineteenth-century city – to a functional traffic route.

The ideal modernist cityscape is characterised by 'fluid' green space.[6] To give apartments maximum exposure to daylight, planners placed apartment buildings some distance apart. Roads cut through the green spaces and were designed mainly with traffic requirements in mind. For example, as part of an argument against Camillo Sitte's concept of 'scenery' (*Kulissen*) in urban planning, Cornelis van Eesteren wrote that streets and squares should be designed 'primarily on the basis of functional necessity'. Van Eesteren contended that this would lead to the emergence of new, 'rational' urban forms, with the potential to 'give harmonic and inhabitable shape to the landscape, including the industrial landscape'.[7]

The first postwar CIAM meetings responded to the destruction of urban centres during the Second World

War and the often disappointingly technocratic nature of the reconstruction plans with a more nuanced view, culminating in the rejection of the idea of zoning by the new, young Team X members. This reopened the debate on the concept of the street, as seen most clearly in the work of the architects Alison and Peter Smithson, who presented their competition entry *Golden Lane* in 1953 at the ninth CIAM meeting. This reconstruction project for Coventry, which was never built, calls for the establishment of a new cohesion between the house, street, district, and city. Although streets are a central theme of this project, they take the unusual form of elevated walkways, referred to as 'streets-in-the-air'. These walkways seem to link the dwellings in the proposed 'superblocks' directly to the spectacular world of leisure symbolised by Marilyn Monroe and Joe DiMaggio in the Smithsons' well-known collage illustration.[8] But a moment's consideration of the horizontal distances that would have to be travelled in this building, not to mention the vertical elevation of the streets, make the chances of any such encounter between those two worlds look very slim. For the Smithsons, who were responding to postwar developments such as the dramatic increase in automobile use and the emergence of supermarkets outside the city, the city was no longer a continuous phenomenon but a 'series of events'.[9] In their perspective on the city, the traditional street dissolved into a network of lines connecting such 'events'.

The street and urbanity today

Tendencies in public space over the past thirty years are often described critically as involving a loss of 'urbanity'. Those who make this claim emphasise the role of controlled indoor public spaces such as shopping malls, airports, the atriums of hotels and office buildings, and gated communities, which are organised

primarily to facilitate commerce and security.[10] These indoor spaces are based on an idealised image of the street in the bourgeois, densely built-up nineteenth-century European city, but cleansed of the beggars, the foul odours and the noise. Because in our own day there is no longer any economic or social need for this confrontational degree of density, all modern recreations of this image of the nineteenth-century street are artificial, like stage settings. Our houses are large enough that we are no longer forced by lack of space or privacy to use the street or pub as an extension of the home. Our workplaces have become twice as spacious in the course of a single generation. And our office buildings provide adequate space and facilities (from restaurants to gyms) for us to comfortably spend the entire working day there. At the same time, our tolerance for noise, bad smells, and traffic disruptions seems to be steadily decreasing. In this context, shouldn't designers make sure that we at least have the opportunity to encounter strangers on an everyday basis, and thus lay a foundation for mutual respect and tolerance in society? The street may actually be the most suitable place to create a public space that is ambivalent in the right way: anonymous enough not to force members of the public to interact, varied enough to be attractive to different groups, and distinctive enough that visitors can form a relationship with it if they choose.

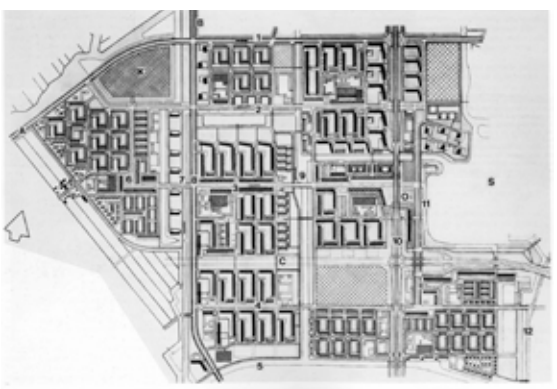
Back to Nieuw-West

To what extent does the idea of the street provide a useful way of looking at the Nieuw-West district's general urban fabric? Does the existing public space in the district suggest opportunities for bringing out its latent strengths? Do the streets and other public spaces in Nieuw-West have unique identities that are worth cherishing and supporting?

The original development plan for the Western Garden Cities, in which the roads are almost entirely

unspecified, shows a number of developments that form spatial units, like square islands distributed over two-dimensional space. The image of islands is especially appropriate given the large distances between the blocks, distances varying between 50 and 100 metres. Nine such islands can be identified in Osdorp between Ookmeerweg and Plasmanlaan. Between them are large green areas filled either with separate, scattered buildings such as churches, schools, and the local city office, or else parallel strips of housing with considerable space between them. The main north-south access roads are in the large green areas, while the main east-west roads run through the middle or along the edge of the islands, connecting them with each other. Consequently, the three east-west roads, Osdorper Ban, Tussenmeer and Pieter Calandlaan, which are about one and a half kilometres in length, pass through at least five or six different spatial 'environments'. This is an interesting fact, which could be described as a unique identity with positive features of its own. Surely this offers opportunities for creating shared spaces that are suited to this specific place and informed by its unique structure?

Cornelis van Eesteren's essay accompanying the exhibition *Rationelle Bebauungsweisen* (Rational Site



Osdorp, revised use plan, 1957–1958

Development), held in Frankfurt in 1930 during the third CIAM conference, ends with these words: 'Since this general plan is future-oriented, the more simplified and fundamental it is, the more valuable it will be. So no rigidly designed city plans along axes! Simple, flexible, and adaptable frameworks are required to make rational site development possible at all.'[11] Nieuw-West displays plenty of this type of flexibility and adaptability, in that the different elements of its urban structure are largely unresponsive to each other. Tellingly, Van Eesteren used 'objects' as a generic term for dwellings, buildings, streets, parks, and other facilities.[12] The buildings barely respond to the street or the intersection, and vice versa. Likewise, the green spaces do not respond to the street or the buildings. This often leaves in-between spaces undefined or – in more positive terms – open to interpretation.

The question is whether this fact can form the basis for building on the district's existing strengths, both preserving them and reinforcing them by adding new ones. In concrete terms, this could mean holding off on large-scale demolition or regeneration and starting with small-scale interventions that work with existing features while trying to add new layers. Allowing the old to persist alongside the new would not only benefit the current residents, who would have the chance to adjust to the changes gradually, it would also, in a very practical sense, enable different kinds of users to coexist: the residents of the older buildings could live side by side with those of the new ones, and small businesses that fit into the existing small shops could rub shoulders with larger companies that need business space designed in accordance with current regulations.

But the large-scale planning process in Nieuw-West has steered a different course. When new buildings are constructed, the stated aim is 'diversity' and creating different 'environments', but that is not the outcome we see in practice. Most of these areas end up oriented towards wealthier residents in a fairly unbalanced way, with little attention devoted to the lifestyles and needs

of the existing residents, let alone seeing their colourful diversity as a potential strength that could help to foster a rich, varied living environment. Planners rarely say anything about public space, except that it should be limited and increasingly privatised, but in fact the focus of attention in these districts should be the wellspring of diversity: the public domain, the area of shared use with functions that support social interaction and counter the formation of isolated enclaves.[13]

Tussenmeer as a new 'city street'

The Western Garden Cities have at least one street with the potential to become a public space integrated into the fabric of the city, where different groups of residents and users of the area can encounter one another. This is Tussenmeer,[14] a street almost one and half kilometres long that connects two squares: Osdorpplein and Dijkgraafplein. In the latter square, Tussenmeer terminates in an imposing thirteen-storey residential building dating from 1972, designed by the architect J. P. Kloos. The building stands perpendicular to Tussenmeer like a wall and so can be recognised from some distance away.[15] On the other side of Dijkgraafplein are pavilion-like single-storey structures. Space flows away here, bounded only in the distance by three-storey housing blocks. Dijkgraafplein and the surrounding buildings form the first cohesive island.

Moving east from here, we arrive at a strip of greenery approximately one hundred metres wide, with two canals and a series of thirteen-storey apartment buildings between them. The regular, rhythmic placement of these blocks, with large spaces between them, extends from Osdorper Ban in the north to the green space in the south. Greenery defines the character of this area, clearly and physically distinguishing it from the second 'island', to the east, through which Tussenmeer runs.

This second island consists of a group of contiguous blocks: two comparable four-storey residential blocks on opposite sides of the street, with similar row housing to the north and south of Tussenmeer. A large strip of greenery offering unobstructed views to the north and south, in combination with the canal Hoekenesgracht, forms the second, large, cohesive green space through which Tussenmeer passes. Until recently the striking local Protestant church De Opgang, designed by the architect J. Krüger, was located there as a freestanding object. On the south side is the sparsely furnished Osdorppark.

This is followed by the third 'island', which begins with a five-storey housing block oriented east-west, so that the living room windows at its end are facing the street. A small pavilion with a post office on the north side of Tussenmeer is followed by a strip of buildings with housing on the three upper floors and small shops on the ground floor, comparable in design to the second island, described above. All of the buildings along Tussenmeer discussed so far date from the 1960s. The transition from Tussenmeer to Osdorpplein on the north side is formed by a building with a two-storey base beneath a seven-storey part that faces the square. This building, probably dating from the 1980s, has large shops on the ground level and first floor. Above that, on the corner, there are apartments. The part of Tussenmeer that passes through this 'third island' is the site of a twice-weekly market.

A walk along Tussenmeer makes it clear how rich the spatial diversity of the area already is. The street has a clear beginning and end, but also reveals a remarkable degree of spatial variation as it cuts through different areas. Yet some factors reduce the coherence of the user's experience of Tussenmeer: in particular, the two wide strips of greenery running perpendicular to the street (and more specifically, the unresponsiveness of the architecture to these green spaces). In order to bring out the diversity of the spatial environments here as a quality that can be consciously experienced,

Tussenmeer, facades

there is a need for a spatial situation in which these different elements interact. Elements that contribute to a cohesive experience of Tussenmeer include, first and foremost, the tram along the middle of the street with a hedgerow on either side. Continuity is also created by the series of small shops, interrupted by the occasional café or snack bar, along the ground level of the rows of buildings and in Dijkgraafplein. Finally, the repeating patterns of the street profile also help to foster cohesion, with a width of approximately thirty metres and street walls thirteen metres in height.

The architecture itself does little to encourage the use of the street, aside from the entrances to the dwellings (when they are not on the side or in the rear of the building) and the presence of small shops. And because these shops close at five pm, relatively little use is made of the street after that time.

This micro-level analysis of Tussenmeer reveals the potential of the Nieuw-West area. The district contains streets and other public spaces with distinctive identities worth maintaining and strengthening. This points the way to a form of development oriented towards continuity and slow transformation, which will give the residents of Nieuw-West the opportunity to gradually establish a relationship with their new surroundings.

Dijkgraafplein, Osdorp, ca. 1971

Notes

1
Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York, 1961, reprinted 1992), 29. The first Dutch translation was published in 2010.

2
See Lieven de Cauter and Andre Loeckx, 'Stedelijkheid: van metropool tot netwerkstad', in Hilde Heynen et al. (eds.) *Dat is Architectuur. Sleutelteksten uit de twintigste eeuw* (Rotterdam, 2001), 818–828.

3
One relevant and not insignificant observation is that the criticism was not of the city itself. On the contrary, the contrast between the city and the countryside was accepted in all of these debates. See Walter Gropius, 'Großstädter bekennt Euch zur Großstadt!', in 'Flach-, Mittel-, Hochbau?', *Das Neue Frankfurt* (1931), 26.

4
Antonio Sant'Elia and F.T. Marinetti, 'L'Architettura Futurista. Manifesto', in Hilde Heijnen et. al. (eds.), *'Dat is Architectuur'. Sleutelteksten uit de twintigste eeuw* (Rotterdam, 2001), 78.

5
Le Corbusier, 'Vers une Architecture', in Heijnen (ed.), op. cit., 125. English translation by John Goodman (trans.), *Toward an Architecture* (London, 2008), 125.

6
See Ulrich Müller, *Raum, Bewegung und Zeit im Werk von Walter Gropius und Ludwig Mies van der Rohe* (Berlin, 2004).

7
From an article published in *i.10 Internationale Revue* in 1929, as cited in Franziska Bollerey, *Cornelis van Eesteren. Urbanismus zwischen De Stijl und C.I.A.M.* (Braunschweig/Wiesbaden, 1999).

8
Max Risselada and Dirk van den Heuvel (eds.), *Team 10, 1953–1981: In Search of a Utopia of the Present* (Rotterdam, 2005), 21–30.

9
'We don't experience the city as a continuous thing anymore, rather as a series of events.' See Alison and Peter Smithson, 'Where to walk and where to ride in our bouncy new clothes and our shiny new cars', in Alison Smithson (ed.), *The Emergence of Team 10 out of CIAM* (London, 1982), 88–91.

10
See e.g. Michael Sorkin, *Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space* (New York, 1992) and Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau, *S,M,L,XL* (Rotterdam, 1995).

11
'Da diese Gesamtplanung auf die Zukunft gerichtet ist, ist sie um so wertvoller, je mehr sie vereinfacht und je grundlegender sie ist. Also keine Stadtpläne, die starr und nach Achsen entworfen sind! Einfache, flexible und anpassungsfähige Stadtgerippe werden die rationellen Bebauungsweisen überhaupt erst ermöglichen.' See Bollerey, op. cit., 216.

12
See Bollerey, op. cit., 236.

13
On this topic, see Helma Hellinga, *Onrust in park en stad. Stedelijke vernieuwing in de Amsterdamse*

Westelijke Tuinsteden (Amsterdam, 2005), 144: 'De gedifferentieerde woonmilieus van de woningcorporaties'.

14
This view is shared by other observers. See, for example, the map by Urhahn Urban Design in Hellinga, op. cit., and the book *Park Stad: Centrum Amsterdam Nieuw West Vernieuwingsplan* (Amsterdam, 2004). This book, produced at the request of the managing committee of the urban district of Osdorp, includes a proposal for Osdorpplein and the adjacent part of Tussenmeer. On a map of desired living environments in 2015, Tussenmeer is defined as a 'city street' (*stadsstraat*).

15
See Manfred Bock and Kees Somer, *Architect J.P. Kloos. De ethiek van de constructie* (Amsterdam, 1986).