

2010

Meanwhile, in the city ...

Experimental challenges

*Somewhere in between
The waxing and the waning wave
Somewhere in between
The night and the daylight
Somewhere in between
The ticking and the tocking clock
Somewhere in between
What the song and silence say
Somewhere in between
Breathing out and breathing in*

(Kate Bush, *Somewhere In Between*, 2005)

Reconstruction. The concept dominates urban policy documents and policy plans, but to date the discourse has lacked depth. And yet reconstruction is today 'the largest and possibly the most difficult challenge facing the discipline of architecture', as Archined has rightly noted. Since 1997, the Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment (VROM) has defined reconstruction as creating a greater mix of residential, work, and recreational uses within urban areas, which enhances the quality of life and creates the enabling conditions for a more multi-faceted economy. Attention focuses particularly on infrastructure, residential environment, facilities, and local businesses. The term 'reconstruction' is used as an umbrella term for all these interventions. But a 'reconstruction' programme is clinical and businesslike, it sounds industrial and technological, and it feels cold and impersonal. In fact, what is at issue here is the Dutch equivalent of 'gentrification'. It is not just a question of smartening up the architecture and town planning of districts and neighbourhoods; it is also about halting the exodus of the middle classes with their wealth from the city. In the wake of that development, the accumulation of lower social groups in old city neighbourhoods is seen as a problem. Reconstruction also means dispersing these groups: 'We're going to drive the poverty right back, beyond Rotterdam's ring road', announced one proud Rotterdam corporation manager, not so long ago.

The phenomenon of reconstruction – which is certainly not unique to the Netherlands, but is found throughout the ‘global village’ – is seldom characterized by discretion or modesty. The upgrading of neighbourhoods and districts is frequently accompanied by major logistical operations, dreamt up by an alliance of corporations, developers, contractors, and officials. The large scale of these ventures has transformed substantial areas of Dutch cities into temporary deserts. The Dutch film *Skin* (Hanro Smitsman, 2008) is set in a landscape of this kind, as a nightmare vision. Against the backdrop of the run-down Crooswijk quarter of Rotterdam, which is in the throes of reconstruction, the film sketches the degeneration of a Jewish boy into a racist skinhead. The tragic story and the horribly realistic setting interact to produce an oppressive piece of urban history. It is a reassuring idea that in reality, such a ravaged and mutilated city is only a temporary phenomenon. Still, growing numbers of people live their everyday lives in the chaotic reality of reconstruction.

Could we conceive of another, more software-oriented way of dealing with the theory and practice of reconstruction? Globalization processes, write Ida Susser and Jane Schneider in *Wounded Cities* (2003), are more visible and tangible in wounded cities and urban districts than anywhere else. While such urban zones are subject to immense pressure, they appear to harbour a unique dynamics. To assume that stagnation and passivity generally set the tone here would be a misconception. Cultivating the capacity to deal with loss, to say goodbye, to show resilience, to get up again and prepare for the future, holds out a challenging potential. After all, dealing with wounds that have been inflicted provides an opportunity to take collective action. Wounded cities call for an imaginative response to the destruction all around, they call for creativity to oppose decline, as the authors maintain. The book was based on a series of studies and symposiums on ‘deconstruction and reconstruction in a world of globalization’. Inspired by the critic David Harvey, it takes a look at cities that have become victims of globalization. The aim of this exercise is not simply to criticize: by studying resilience and creativity, the researchers hope to chart a different, new dynamics, and to provide building-blocks for a ‘politics of reconstruction’.

With their Laboratory for the Interim, the artist Sabrina Lindemann and the architect Iris Schutten launched a project to study the Transvaal neighbourhood of The Hague,

which is undergoing reconstruction. This rather messy former working-class area with a large proportion of rented housing is being torn down and transformed into an orderly neighbourhood that will include houses to be sold to the middle classes. The knowledge of the wounded city also provides the basis for the 'Laboratory' in Transvaal: how should artists, architects and designers deal with the interim, which is full of boarded-up blocks of houses and pieces of derelict land, long periods of vacancy, and crumbling social cohesion? These are the questions posed by the artists who launched the Laboratory. What do we learn from temporary architectural interventions and temporary artistic interventions in these areas? Can we conceive of new urban strategies, which could anticipate the near-permanent presence of the interim in our urban condition?

A Laboratory for the Interim is a tricky project. In a time in which interim management, interactivity, interdisciplinarity, and interim emergency legislation in the criminal law increasingly determine the rhythm of everyday life, the 'interim' appears to be dissolving into directionless waves of a permanent dynamics. Our age, says the philosopher Henk Oosterling, has become 'radically mediocre'. Jeroen Boomgaard comments in his essay 'Het tijdelijke van het tussen' (2007) that the interim exists only by virtue of the concrete and well-defined. The most intriguing aspect of the interim, after all, is its hybrid and directionless outward form: it does not appear until a category, medium or development exceeds its boundaries and manages to 'circumvent the frameworks that direct our gaze'. Research into the interim enables us to think more sharply and to open up new perspectives. But once we define the interim and can capture it in new urban strategies, its moment has passed, and it eludes our comprehension.

Even in *Wounded Cities*, the interim is not the object of the enterprise. Through their studies of processes of decline and resilience in twelve cities, the authors hope to advance arguments that will help to renew and hence change the political approach to, and policies on, metropolises: a city is not a physical Moloch, it is created by human beings. Moments of reconstruction and collective stories of pain and loss provide an excellent opportunity to recalibrate social community and human dignity and to give them a powerful voice in our ideas about the city, about the people who live there and make it what it is, and about globalization. In this context, globalization

and reconstruction are stripped of their businesslike, bureaucratic and technological casing. For cities, writes the anthropologist and geographer David Harvey in the same book, are vulnerable forms of human organization: ‘... the city is an organic form of social life that originates through human action. The city grows, is sustained, or dies out as the case may be. In the process it can assume different states, such as robust or wounded, healthy or sick, elegant or shamefully ugly’ ... ‘The city is a body politic.’

A similar vibrant view of the city inspired Charles Landry to write *The Art of City-Making* (2006). In a different context, he had previously written an optimistic manifesto, urging project developers and policy-makers to make more use of the city’s creative potential. His study *The Creative City* (2000) was intended, according to the subtitle, as a ‘toolkit for urban innovators’. Readers were shown numerous practices, methods, and illustrative examples of urban innovations. According to Landry, urban development is often hopelessly out of date, since its bureaucratic and technological context makes it difficult to create openings for software solutions, interculturality, social creativity, and imaginative responses. This slightly chaotic but exemplary book was overshadowed, however, by *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2002). The two titles were soon – wrongly – lumped together. The economist Richard Florida also argued in favour of more creativity in urban development processes, and assigned the new creative class to the vanguard in that endeavour. His central thesis was this: the more successfully a city nurtures its creative class, and encourages that class to identify with it, the more the city’s economy, prosperity and tolerance will thrive. The book – though frequently misunderstood – became a bestseller, because it was perfectly in tune with the global effort to achieve reconstruction and better establishment requirements for newcomers in expanding cities.

But that was not what Landry had meant at all. In the opening sentences of *The Art of City-Making*, he asserts that in today’s world, creativity has been hijacked by the fashionable discourse of the creative class, in which gentrification, real estate policies, and the strengthening of the middle class have been proclaimed core values. He therefore argues for a more everyday redefinition of creativity, independent of specific occupations or professions, and wants to shift the focus away

from product innovation and media to social and other facets of creativity. After all, art and 'artistic thinking' enhance all aspects of life in the metropolis, as well as the city's capacity to generate value.

Much as *Wounded Cities* explores the area between metropolitan processes of decline and growth, Landry opens up a domain between art and science. While it is true that his Laboratory for the Interim accepts art as the guiding principle, he nonetheless advocates an empirical method of research, and insists on the need for verifiable hypotheses. By naming his project 'the art of city-making', he seeks to prioritize valuable and value-adding aspects of the city, and places his own research in the context of subjective experience. He therefore rejects the term 'urban development', since this concept remains trapped in the construction of a physical environment from the discourse of professional architecture and urban planning. Landry too seeks to add the human factor to the discourse of urban development:

What gives the city life, meaning and purpose are the acts people perform on the physical stage. The stage set is not the play. The physical things are the accoutrements, helpful instruments and devices. The aim [of city-making] is to shift the balance, to increase the credibility and status of the scriptwriters, the directors and performers. ... too often we rely on the priesthood of those concerned with the physical, and they perhaps more than others are responsible for the cities we have.

Remodelled as a toolkit, *The Art of City-Making* provides a dazzling collection of examples and descriptions of more and less successful practices of this city-making. He includes the Netherlands in his argument, praising Amsterdam's city centre, for instance, for its splendid mixture of chique grandeur and sloppy negligence. In Rotterdam, Landry goes on City Safari, and discerns a model for incorporating tourism into the discovery of the city. He does not include The Hague, but projects like Jan Konings's *Hotel Transvaal* and Bureau Venhuizen's *Autonië* would not have been out of place in Landry's overview. These experiments both offer 'software solutions' for problems associated with reconstruction processes.

What is more, as icons, eye-catchers and crowd-pullers, these initiatives fit perfectly into the transformation and gentrification that property developers and managers have in mind. Metropolitan problems are seen as unique design opportunities. In *Participation and Collaboration in Contemporary Art* (2009), Eva Fotiadi refers to this point of view as the theoretical backbone of Bureau Venhuizen. The physical, architectural, technological, and cultural problems of a neighbourhood are explored, mapped out, and identified as potential design phenomena. In the next stage, these phenomena are translated into specific design practices, yielding fresh perspectives and impulses for spatial planning. This is an example of the experimental method advocated in *The Art of City-Making*: the artist becomes an artist-researcher.

Although Konings and Venhuizen seem rather to skate around the discourse of art in the public space and refuse to define themselves as artists, underlying their practice is an interesting view that I would describe as 'research-based art'. The idea derives from the work of the British author Colin Bennett. In *Politics of the Imagination* (2002), Bennett described the work of the writer Charles Fort as 'facts as art form'. In four books published between 1919 and 1933, Fort expounded his philosophy of *intermediatism* and introduced the hyphen as the core of his convictions. The essence of our knowledge, says Fort, lies not so much in fixed concepts, categories, and media, but precisely in the field of tension in between. This American sceptic, born into a family of Dutch immigrants, was misinterpreted in his lifetime as an opponent of scientific thought and champion of an esoteric philosophy. He himself preferred to speak of humour: it is true that he denounced science's absolutist claims to the truth, but he also rejected the equally absolutist claims of theosophical and other holistic world views.

Fort used the empirical or research-based method as a literary model. In so doing, he created a unique artistic genre: the genre of forgotten data. In 1919 he published *The Book of the Damned*. Fort spent his life in libraries and archives, and became obsessed by the exclusivity of the scientific research method. Researchers gather data, but to formulate verifiable hypotheses, they are expected to eliminate data that do not fit into scientific utterances of universal validity. Fort became an activist and set himself up as a champion of data that had been banished – or in his term, 'damned'. In his 'Book of the Damned', he delved into meteorology. He spent years

studying scientific journals and noting weird and wonderful observations made by meteorologists, which had never been incorporated into the epistemology of meteorology. He then proceeded to classify his 'damned data' according to numerous categories. The result was twenty-eight hilarious chapters about yellow rains, red rains, black rains, rains of stones, fish, and frogs – each one duly furnished with the source, year, location, and the observer's name. In the meantime he indulged in speculation to his heart's content, revealing the contours of a damned but cheerful universe. In the marvellous feature film *Magnolia* (1999), the director Paul Thomas Anderson offered up an ode to this universe, presenting an intriguing composite mosaic composed of shards of apparently random events.

'Damned' data belong pre-eminently to the sphere of art. More than any other sphere of life, art provides scope for reinterpreting lost or overlooked knowledge and translating it to a different epistemology, and hence to a different view of reconstruction. This is not just something that we learn from reading *Wounded Cities* and *The Art of City-Making*, but it could also serve as the basis for a 'laboratory for the interim', which can combine research into forgotten, overlooked or rejected data with concrete initiatives and practical design solutions. That interim can never be the objective, but it does provide a superb opportunity to furnish urban development, spatial planning, community, and collective action with different, new perspectives.

Experimental projects and trials are now under way in numerous districts and neighbourhoods such as East Haarlem, Overvecht (Utrecht), Westwijk (Vlaardingen), Nieuw-Crooswijk and Pendrecht (Rotterdam), Piushaven (Tilburg) and Transvaal (The Hague). As a unique, subjective form of urban anthropology, this research-based art is gradually supplanting classical forms of art in the public space. 'Today there is a greater need for series of interventions during longer periods of transformation than for artworks in the public space', reported the cultural attaché of Rotterdam's neighbourhood Tarwewijk. The fact that this art is attracting more and more clients and financiers from the public-private sector demonstrates the genre's potential, and at the same time it reveals a desire to break with the clinical and technological nature of urban development, urban planning, and reconstruction.

An empirical practice of this kind in the public space naturally paves the way for new partners, including representatives of 'sci-art', research-based arts, community art, and urban design. In a publication of Designplatform Rotterdam, *Wég met de publieke ruimte* (2008), the design historian Timo de Rijk assigns an important role to designers in the redefinition of the public space.

The public authorities, driven by commercial motives, arbitrary political ambitions, and a good deal of political correctness, are incapable of actively organizing the specific use of new users in the public space. They are at a loss when it comes to allocating places. The authorities supervise the public space as a place that is accessible to all, but is gradually becoming of little if any use to anyone ... Product designers should challenge the claims to a universal use of the total public space by a highly diverse group of users. Only then will they be able to play the role they are expected to play – that of inventors of products that define the new public space.

Again, the question arises: is it possible to devise a different, more software-oriented, approach to reconstruction? Charles Landry concludes *The Art of City-Making* with a list of specific action points, which can also serve as a manual for a laboratory for the interim:

- 1 Anticipate crisis situations: cultural, social, and economic problems provide unique opportunities to rethink the city;
- 2 Strive to expand and broaden a network of partners and like-minded people from different walks of life;
- 3 Take stock of creative potentials and possible obstacles: who is promoting creative processes, and what are the factors impeding their development?
- 4 Identify the city's exemplary projects; visit them with a team that is varied in composition, and evaluate their operational methods;
- 5 Gather evidence that will lend weight to your arguments, and make your views on creativity, arts, and soft technology widely known;
- 6 Attune your programme to the city's 'master strategy' (generally in terms of its economy or spatial planning) and inject a cultural or creative agenda into that strategy;

- 7 Devise a programme of pilot projects, and ensure the collective visibility of these programmes, for instance through exhibitions or festivals;
- 8 Study the city's own narratives about itself and the image it projects to the outside world, and investigate whether these are in need of correction;
- 9 Set about creating an influential lobby that is willing to disseminate your views and programmes in seminars and brainstorming sessions;
- 10 Avoid terms like 'creative city' and 'creative class', but allow others to discover the creative potential of your programme.

On 6 September 2008, an article about Hotel Transvaal appeared in the lifestyle magazine *Elle Wonen*, recommending the rooms and their design: 'Enjoy an intercontinental breakfast in one of the local cafés and meet the people who live in Transvaal'. The article was accompanied by a photograph depicting a luxurious four-poster bed and a magnificent chandelier set against a unique, tasteful interior. For a moment, Transvaal shook off the clinical regime of reconstruction. Just briefly, 'damned data' were strung together to produce a coherent story of the city.

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