

# Interfering: Contextual Interventions in Urban Space

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The notion of place and location in urban areas seems to be vanishing, due to the growing importance of mobility, and appears to be in conflict with larger developments caused by the processes of globalisation. The focus on mobility has reduced urban space to an indistinct collection of pathways and impersonal territories. The possibility of the public realm as an instrument for shaping society seems to have been forgotten. Our interest is in developing urban and architectural tactics for sites in the changing urban landscape. We intend to discover and collect hidden layers in the urban landscape and to use these as triggers for urban activity.

## Urban adventure

The discovery of the city as a challenging landscape is definitely not only of concern to architects and urbanists. The so-called urban adventure is not tied to artistic disciplines, but could rather be considered to be a sport or a game. All over the world, groups of people are wandering around metro lines, bridges under construction or old drains. These adventurers, looking for ways to explore the city as a terrain of new nature, form an imaginative source of inspiration. Walking through deserted tunnels, hearing the distant noises of the surrounding city, climbing giant tubes without knowing where they will lead and touching rough, unfinished materials, one can experience excitement equal to experiences normally sought in nature. Seen through their eyes, the city is a complex landscape, containing forests and mountains and bearing its own secrets. Urban climbing might be the most extreme example of urban adventure, as it is a sport that literally approaches the city as if it were a landscape of mountains. Buildings offer attractive peaks, and bridges present challenging boulder routes. Probably, the most adventurous holiday spot can be found just around the corner. Lately, groups have appeared which practice *urban free flow*: imitating movements from films such

as *The Matrix*, and combining acrobatic movements with urban climbing skills. Discoveries, adventures and trips are extensively documented and distributed by websites and e-mail groups. Two of the best-known sites are *Infiltration* from a group based in Toronto, Canada and *Cave Clan* based in Melbourne, Australia.<sup>1</sup> Undoubtedly, these tours reveal more about a city than its traditional sightseeing tours along popular tourist highlights do.

Urban adventure is not a new way of dealing with the city. In 1955 Guy Debord, one of the initiators of the *Internationale Situationniste*, published the 'Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography', and developed a practice called the *dérive*, in which 'one or more persons during a certain period drop their usual motives for movement and action, their relations, their work and their activities, and let themselves be drawn to the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there' (Debord 1990: 76). In a playful way, the *dérive* investigates the psycho-geographical effects of the city. It aims to provoke different ways of experiencing the urban structure. In one of the key texts propounding this movement, Gilles Ivain argues that mechanical society and 'cold' architecture disconnect people from their dreams and longings (Ivain 1996). He pleads for experimental architecture, an architecture whose intention is to articulate space and time and stimulate dreams. He imagines the ideal life as a continuous wandering through the surrealism of the cityscape. In literature, this way of looking at the constructed environment manifested itself earlier. Guy Debord often refers back to writers with psycho-geographic features, such as Claude-Nicolas Ledoux, Charles Baudelaire, Thomas De Quincey and Edgar Allan Poe (Debord 1996).<sup>2</sup> In 1921 Dadaists, including André Breton and Paul Eluard, organised a trip to the deserted church of St. Julien le Pauvre in Paris. In promoting the event, the Dadaists promised to remedy 'the incompetence of suspect guides and cicerones', offering instead a series of visits to selected sites, 'particularly those which really have no reason for existing'.<sup>3</sup> It is from this background that the Dutch artist

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<sup>1</sup> Many websites on urban adventure can be found on the internet: [www.infiltration.org](http://www.infiltration.org) masters *The Urban Exploration Ring*, which links a lot of other websites on urban adventure. A London- and New York-based website on urban free flow is [www.urbanfreeflow.com](http://www.urbanfreeflow.com).

<sup>2</sup> The article cited Edgar Allan Poe as a 'pioneer of the macabre and of the detective story, and the flaneur was deemed psycho-geographic in landscape', and the New York Dadaist Arthur Cravan as 'psycho-geography in the rushed drift'.

<sup>3</sup> This brief history of urban adventure *avant la lettre* is given at <http://www.infiltration.org/history-timeline.html>.

Constant introduced his urban plans, called New Babylon. New Babylon, a large free structure meandering above cities such as Amsterdam and Paris, would offer people the opportunity for endless wandering and play in architectural structures without direct meaning or function.

## **Interfering**

The idea for the book *Interfering*, a collection of projects with a similar approach to looking at the city, was born in 2001 as an initiative by artist Hieke Pars and architect Iris Schutten (see Pars, Schutten 2003). The projects discussed in this book are all, in one way or another, interventions in the continuously changing cityscape. They may, for just a moment, illuminate all times and scales of a place. Anchored in a sometimes very personal understanding of the city, the projects demand that attention be paid to the peculiarities of a place, and perhaps show a fragment of its memory or future. The projects are roughly divided into three categories: projects that change the form or looks of the urban, projects that change or add urban routes, such as the *Hidden City* tour, and interventions that change the function of urban places.

The *Hidden City* tour was organised in autumn 2002 by Architecture Studio de Ruimte, by order of STROOM, the local artist foundation (Fig. 1, 2). The journey revealed a layer of extraordinary places in the city centre of The Hague that is normally hidden from the eye. The tour meandered through hidden underworlds, out-of-sight rear sides and normally inaccessible uplands. Guides and narrators offered an intimate way to get to know these places and their stories. An example of the temporary change of function is the *Rooftop Campsite*, an art project by Nicoline van Harskamp and Ton Schuttelaar, offering people eleven different campsites on the urban rooftop landscape. *Hypothèses d'Amarage*, a project by SYN-in Montreal, Canada, changed the perception of everyday places by forcing minor changes. Picnic tables were placed at various sites of urban abundance in order to offer new opportunities for interaction with these deserted or neglected areas. This intervention encouraged people to notice and enjoy the hidden beauty in urban spaces: a beauty that was by no means 'designed' in that way at all.

In spring 2004 De Ruimte was asked by Showroom Mama in Rotterdam to design an exhibition concerning public space (Fig. 3). The exhibition showed several video-animations, manipulations and radio projects that reflected upon

actual tendencies of safety and consumerism in the public realm. In collaboration with 2012 Architects, De Ruimte proposed an *inside out showroom*. Since the exhibition concerned public space in a critical way, the showroom itself was made public. Therefore the windows were removed for a period of ten full days and nights. A blue podium stretched out onto the street, blurring the border between public and private space. The showroom became part of the public space, and public space became part of the showroom. It was stated that the urban public space is more and more determined by an anonymous social fear and urge to security. In reaction to this state of fear, the showroom was put in a 'crisis situation' by opening its space to the street life. The architectural installation was not only a means of presentation, but also a tool that challenged unforeseeable interactions with public life. During the show several acts took place spontaneously, several gatherings occurred and the podium appeared to be a beloved skating device.

According to the Italian architect and theorist Aldo Rossi, the most sustainable parts of a city are its ground plan and its streets, which together form a basis on which the city grows and transforms throughout the ages (Rossi 1982). Memory is the binding element of the complex structure of a city. The city, according to this point of view, is the memory of the people. The city has its own consciousness and memory. No city will ever be finished. Urbanity is a continuous development, the city an organism continuously mutating at different scales and speeds. The evolution of a landscape takes centuries, and the development of urbanity takes decades, whereas the functional use of buildings can alter within years. Therefore, in architectural practice we try to make use of those bearers of memory. Our intention is to order the development of concepts that do not claim a fixed end product, but that instead allow a place to breathe and transform. By referring to hidden layers of memory, we hope to enable the public/consumers to identify with their urban space. This approach to architecture implies one should leave space for the unforeseen.

### Casco architecture

In autumn 2003 the notorious squat building in Blauwe Aanslag in The Hague was demolished after more than 20 years of squatting. During the years, the building had grown into a well-known meeting point for the subculture and art scene of The Hague and surroundings. Apart from around 40 inhabitants, the

building housed public functions, such as a cinema, a radio station, a restaurant and a concert hall. To diminish the pain caused by the demolition of the squat, the city council of The Hague offered the squatters the chance to buy and renovate an old school building dating from 1907. Around 500,000 euro was paid for the building, and in 2000, Architecture Studio de Ruimte was asked to design the plans (Fig. 4).

In this project, several layers were taken into account. A strong social background of the project was to give the underground culture in The Hague a chance to develop its own environment, based on a high level of self-involvement. The architectural strategy was therefore based on the idea of *Casco* – a building that may be changed over the years by its users. The historical context was taken into account from the start of the project, as the building was a municipal monument. The architectural interventions were therefore limited to small transformations of the routing and use of the public and private. By this method, the building remained relatively untouched in a way which probably would not have been possible for commercial investors.

In order to keep the rents low and get the subculture involved, the economic background of the project was exceptional. An important decision was to make use of existing economic small-scale businesses in the neighbourhood and businesses for future users. With its relatively low rents and *Casco*-approach, the project offers an alternative to the usual social housing in The Netherlands. The new use of the building adds some accessible public functions to the neighbourhood and intensifies the public space.

The *Casco*-approach implied that the design concentrated mainly on the routing, facilities and fire regulations. The use of the space was intensified by a factor of 2.3 by involving the formerly unused basement and attic. Furthermore, the high ceilings of the classrooms offered possibilities for mezzanines, enlarging the surface space of the apartments. The new routing ensures that some former hallways are now used more efficiently. The monumental entry hall, for example, currently houses a restaurant. By adding a porch and replacing an entrance, a former private courtyard opens up to the street, thereby introducing several degrees of intimacy in the walk from the public space towards the new entrance.

Sustainability has been an important point of departure for the renovation. This large-scale ecological system is unique in an urban situation such as that in The Netherlands. An ecological heating and water system is being realised and,

in the apartments, organic waste toilets are being placed. The water system makes use of both rainwater and wastewater. Heaters made of concrete, based on the Finn oven principle, developed in Finland by Heikki Hyyttiainen in the 1980s, heat the building. The design has been transformed and made applicable for this situation.

The involvement of future dwellers and users during all phases of the renovation process ensured that the design as well as the organisational structure would be specific for this group. A large and experienced contractor completed the biggest and most difficult tasks. In every possible other case, work was done by smaller businesses that are in one way or another involved with the future users or the neighbourhood. During construction, a steel and wood workshop was run by the future users, producing, for example, window frames. The future users were responsible for a great part of the finishing work such as painting and interior work. This specific project organisation, on the one hand, involved a lot of time and discussion, but on the other hand it saved building costs and, most important, it created strong involvement by the future users. The building is currently in use but will never be completely finished. Users are responsible for the maintenance of the building and new temporary uses for spaces are constantly being developed. The courtyard has housed flea markets, concerts and barbeques, in the children's museum on the ground floor new art works appear weekly, and the apartment floors show a wide range of spatial interventions through walls and mezzanines. This place in the city, at the inner ring and just between the lively city centre and more quiet housing neighbourhoods, will become a new cultural hub in The Hague.

### **Creative industry in the former harbour**

The regeneration of Amsterdam's IJ waters found its starting point in the 1980s, when Rem Koolhaas designed a master plan for the IJ-banks, which has never been realised. The Eastern Docklands, consisting of several different peninsulas, served as laboratories for new urban planning methods in the 1990s and are close to being finished. Large construction projects are now taking place at the Eastern Trade Quay, with hotel and retail functions, offices, a cruise terminal and a large new music hall designed by the Danish 3xNielsen. The Silodam causeway now houses apartments in three monoliths: two renovated silo buildings and a new apartment building designed by Architecture Studio MVRDV. A new subway

route will link the North side of the IJ waters to the city centre, and plans for regeneration of the northern banks are currently being produced.

The discovery of these former industrial sites in Amsterdam has long occurred under the initiative of dwellers, artists and non-profit organisations. In the period between the departure of harbour activity and the new urban development, the IJ banks were taken over by squatters who used the empty warehouses and silos as studios or houses. The innovative capacity of the squat culture may unintentionally have paved the way for the municipality and real estate developers to regenerate the sites. By these means, the subculture undoubtedly has played a role in the process of 'gentrification' – the regeneration of sites as the result of the capitalist processes of spatial, economic and social restructuring (see Sassen 2001).<sup>4</sup> The artistic liveliness and cultural production that used to characterise the IJ banks, has been moving from site to site.

Whereas the squatters mostly were able to adjust to the existing buildings and so kept the old industrial atmosphere alive, adding new functions and layers, most of the recent redevelopments often completely wiped out the existing social, economic, physical and historical features so characteristic of these areas. Fortunately, some of the squatters who discovered the harbour areas as excellent sites for a free way of living and working became organised<sup>5</sup> and thus played a role in the development of the areas.

In October 1999 the city department Amsterdam Noord organised a competition for 'creative entrepreneurs' to develop the NDSM ship wharf at the Northern banks of the IJ into a versatile cultural site. An organisation derived from the Guild offered a proposal combining architectural ideas with economic feasibility studies. With some other architects, De Ruimte was involved in the master plan for this competition. This plan served as a Casco in which there was freedom

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<sup>4</sup> [Gentrification is] linked to the profound transformation in advanced capitalism: the shift to services and ... the privatization of consumption and service provision. Gentrification emerged as a visible spatial component of this transformation. It was evident in the redevelopment of waterfronts....' (Sassen 2001: 261.)

<sup>5</sup> *Gilde van werkgebouwen aan het IJ* (Amsterdam IJ Industrial Working Buildings Guild) was founded in reaction to the proposals of official institutions regarding the plans by the city of Amsterdam for the IJ banks. The Guild pleaded for maintenance of historical and architecturally important buildings and re-use of these buildings, aiming for a small-scale structure with non-commercial rent prices. The Guild has been active in developing ideas for urban re-use, in cooperation with two housing corporations. The books *De Stad als Casco* (*City as Casco*, Staal 1994) and *The Turning Tide* (Buchel, Hogervorst 1997) were published by the Guild.

for users to explore. The competition was won and currently the NDSM wharf is being converted into a terrain for artistic and cultural exchange. The huge shipping wharf, measuring 30,000 square metres, is due to become a 'breeding place', where innovative ideas and (sub)cultural experiments will be born, and where a variety of disciplines will come together and form a symbiosis on one site: an impressive monument of industrial heritage. Thereby the NDSM wharf will function as an attractor of public activity in this area (Fig. 5).

The dock building still exudes an industrial atmosphere due to its roughness and oversized measurements. Existing qualities, such as the impressive steel construction, the roof lights and some industrial relics such as cranes and presses form the structuring element for the design of the new program. The building is divided into four sections: a manifestation area with facilities for theatrical performances in the North and highest wing, a series of theatre studios in the east wing, a youth centre in the west wing and the 'scaffold city' in the middle. The latter is based on the artist Constant's utopian dream of New Babylon. A frame will be constructed in which Casco studios and offices can be built. This scaffold city functions as an organic artist village, analogous to squatted free-states such as Ruigoord and the ADM terrain in Amsterdam (or, in Denmark, Christiania).

Architecture Studio de Ruimte created the design and realisation of section 4, the youth centre in the west wing of the building. Within section 4, an indoor skate park, a climbing hall, music, theatre and dance studios and offices will be realised for the youth culture in Amsterdam Noord. The starting point for the design is an urban approach of separate buildings connected by public space in the form of squares and streets. By giving each of the different functions its own specific form and material, a diversity of street façades and public spaces will be created. The skate park is an indirect continuation of a squatted skate paradise in a former *vrieshouse* at the previous Eastern trade quay, now demolished. The indoor skate park will be built on 7 metres, above ground level and above the studios, thereby forming a determining spatial structure (Fig. 6). The skate park is a new element characterised by wood and concrete placed within the old steel structure. The contrast between old and new materials and the distance that is kept from the monumental structure ensure the skate park will be differentiated from the existing building.



## Conclusion

The challenge for urban regeneration in this kind of location is to develop a site-specific approach, which allows the reinforcement of existing qualities on the site. These qualities, as may be concluded from the above-mentioned examples, are not only to be found on an architectural level. Other layers include the social and economic, as well as temporary (sub)cultural activities that have gained a position in the public consciousness. A flexible design strategy should therefore not only contain urban landscape-architectonical and architectural guidelines, but also programmatic generators for activity. All the projects mentioned within this article tried to evoke action. With the *Hidden City* tour, we intended to show another side of the city centre; the intervention in Showroom Mama aimed to challenge people to think about private–public space. With the renovation of the school building, space was given to a local subculture and public life was brought to a city quarter. The challenge of the NDSM project is to re-use the impressive spatial qualities of an important part of city history, by realising broad cultural activity.

By means of these projects, whether architectural or art-related, we hope to bring back some of the public space and public memory to the impersonal global city.

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Figure 1] *Hidden City* tour. Roofscapes. The Hague, 2002 (photo by De Ruimte).



Figure 2] *Hidden City* tour. Courtyards. The Hague, 2002 (photo by De Ruimte).



Figure 3] Showroom Mama exhibition. Gallery space is extended to the street, or gallery has become part of sidewalk. 2004 (photo by De Ruimte).

Figure 4] Former school converted into building for communal living. The Hague, 2000–2004 (photo by De Ruimte).





Figure 5] Site NDSM ship wharf Amsterdam, seen from the IJ waters (photo by De Ruimte).

Figure 6] NSDM skate park. De Ruimte, 2002–2004 (photo by Jannes Linders).

