

Chris Keulemans

De Tolhuistuin - *On trying to be the place to be*

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The place

The location is spectacular. Right across the water from Amsterdam's Central Station, on the traditional wrong side of the river. In 2008, Shell oil company sold this property to the city of Amsterdam, after having declared it off-limits to normal citizens for decades. The municipality decided to return this area, traditionally known as De Tolhuistuin, to the general public. The former Shell cantina, the park behind it and four surrounding buildings were to be transformed into a new arts centre.

The cantina, designed in the mid-seventies by Dutch architect Arthur Staal, is a two-story beehive construction of approximately 4500 m². With its windows looking out over the river on all sides, it takes little imagination to see how the building could easily become the new hotspot on this side of town. The old park with its monumental trees is an attraction in its own right. And the four other buildings needed only a few adjustments to be turned into perfect workspaces for artists and creative companies. In short, the place to be.

The idea

The place practically dictates the nature of this arts centre in the making. It is open to all sides. The ferry boat from Central Station is free, runs day and night, and takes you two minutes to get there. Next door, a new riverside zone of up-market apartment buildings, including the impressive new Eye Filminstitute, is under construction. And of course, De Tolhuistuin connects the city centre to this part of town, the North part, that we call Noord.

Open to all sides should also be true of the art we offer. All kinds of art for all kinds of people, is the shortest summary of the vision we have. Performing arts, visual arts, rooted in the neighborhood and internationally oriented, accessible and sophisticated, culturally diverse and cosmopolitan, aimed at the widest possible variety of visitors and participants. The cantina now counts – after a serious renovation – three stages, two exhibition spaces, two dance studios and a huge restaurant including an open riverside terrace.

Inhabiting the four surrounding buildings are now a host of (mostly) young music agencies, theatre makers, writers, architects, visual artists and designers. All of them contribute to the public atmosphere and activities in De Tolhuistuin, so as to make the open and dynamic character of the place a truly collective responsibility.

The protagonists

It all started with a group of committed citizens of Noord, who lobbied with the municipality not to sell this property for big money, but to give it the cultural and social destination this part of town deserves. This grass-roots group is now represented in the board of De Tolhuistuin.

The municipality then opened a competition for good ideas. The winner would rent the place for five years, at a cultural rate, just as Shell had left it. No more, no less. Out of fifty entries, our little foundation won. Non-profit organisation, high on ideas, short on cash, the work started out as a volunteer business, slowly but surely raising its profile and subsequently, the necessary budgets.

Chairman: Jos, a former politician for the Green-Left party and a fluent, visionary essayist of social change. Artistic director: me, a traveling writer with the experience of running a cultural centre in the heart of Amsterdam, incapable of saying no. Financial director: Rob, a tireless schemer of the arithmetic of new venues in improbable locations. Producer: Touria, a beautiful daughter of Moroccan immigrants with a flawless sense of the nuts and bolts of human nature. Producer: Koosje, a dynamic child of the riverboat trade, cheerful and relentless at mobilizing people. Programmer: Sènamì, born in Amsterdam, roots in Benin, at home among the Afropolitans of the new Europe.

The neighborhood

The North of Amsterdam, which we call Noord, used to be to Amsterdam what Australia was to England. A hundred years ago, they sent their criminals, alcoholics, homeless and general misfits here to learn how to become decent citizens. Needless to say, this social-democrat utopia failed almost instantly. But once the former hamlets, built on the higher grounds among swampland, slowly united Noord flourished in the fifties and sixties, when the huge dockyards employed many of its inhabitants. Once they went bankrupt, in the early eighties, the whole neighborhood sank into the boredom and recession by which Noord was known until very recently. Today, Noord counts over 80.000 inhabitants, no cinema, one decrepit theatre, half a bookshop, four public libraries and suddenly, a flurry of new creative activity on the waterfront.

De Tolhuistuin borders on a neighborhood that was built in the thirties as one of the earliest and most successful attempts in Amsterdam to create decent housing for average people. Even today, these working class houses look charming from the outside. But on the inside – and I can tell, having moved here four years ago – the houses are damp, cramped and noisy. Sewage is in bad shape, water and heating systems often falter, the cold creeps in through the old walls and windows. And still, large families, often of migrant origin, live here. The whole neighborhood is urgently in need of a serious transformation. Unemployment, low education and crime rates are among the worst in the country. And yet, there is a sense of the old Amsterdam here, the sense of hard life and tough jokes and looking out for one's own, that prevails – and should not be sacrificed to the gentrification that seems inevitable in a former working class, former dockyard, former wrong side of the river atmosphere like this.

The neighbors

When I moved here, in the spring of 2008 immediately after winning the competition for De Tolhuistuin, I had hardly visited this side of the river. I was a textbook downtown cosmopolitan intellectual, with a number of books to my name and years as the director of a prestigious institute for cultural and political debate.

But never had I felt so much at home in Amsterdam as when I moved here, to the Jasmijnstraat, two minutes from De Tolhuistuin. Within weeks, I became familiar with Ali, and older Turkish guy retired after thirty years of hard work at the dockyards. His son Hasan, who runs a good neighborhood grocery shop around the corner. Baptiste, a soft-spoken Haitian supporting four children by three mothers in two Caribbean countries, by cleaning the Ajax football stadium. Gerrit, a former mailman who mumbles in old age but will always borrow you his garden equipment. Duvan, the young and ambitious Turkish tobacco shop owner, who curses this neighborhood but is immensely popular among everyone who frequents his premises. Umuhan, the elegant young woman who runs a hardly successful restaurant with her sweet husband Aslan, now expecting their fourth child. Jan, the old sailor, who knows exactly which social service offers free meals on which days of the week. Henk, the other old sailor, who hugs you affectionately although you don't understand a word he says, courtesy of the beer he has been drinking since early morning.

These are the people we need to attract to De Tolhuistuin. It's just down the road, but alien to them because Shell always secured its properties in such a militant fashion. Now, I want them to feel at home there. Just like I do. This is their territory, not just that of the curious downtown art aficionado's. If we fail to attract the neighbors, De Tolhuistuin will have failed. It's as simple, and as complicated, as that.

Building a collective

In order to get there, De Tolhuistuin has to be a collective effort. Everyone working and renting and partying here needs to share that mission. Some eighty artistically and commercially inclined people, from very young to very experienced, have to understand that the whole place won't work if they don't get behind the idea together and push.

This means conquering a long list of obstacles: practical, financial, intellectual and emotional. Just down the road, the original idea of creating a neighborhood where even the least privileged would feel themselves taken seriously as contributing members of society, is still there for all to see.

Including its pitfalls and vulnerability to changing times. It's up to us to prove that the idea of a collectivity which shares resources and inspiration is still viable, even at the uncertain and unsettling start of the 21st century.

The big players

In the bigger picture, De Tolhuistuin is no more than a dot on the city map, invested with much larger interests than just creating an open arts space. The municipality has designated this side of the river as one of its three major urban development zones, to which it invests heavily even in times of crisis. Which means that its contribution to the renovation and development costs of De Tolhuistuin (upwards of € 3 million by now) should be returned with a profit. Our success will be measured by its effect on property value over the next decade.

Two market parties have invested heavily in the area over the past years. One of them, ING Real Estate, had to dismantle because of the credit crunch and abandoned its high ambitions for the luxury high-rises nextdoor that will now probably never materialize. The other, housing corporation Ymere, has a less clear cut commercial interest – it owns a large part of the area, both the social housing and the new commercial property, and combines its real estate agenda with a traditional social-democrat belief that financial investments will only pay off if they are matched with a social and cultural impulse in the neighborhood.

As a result of these and other efforts, the borough (*stadsdeel*) of Noord now has to adjust to no longer being the boring, troubled and neglected part of town, but on the contrary, a new area of creative and commercial potential – and this process of adjustment is accompanied by a jumble of traditional and innovative models of development.

The crisis

Needless to say, the economic recession has harshly proven some of the traditional models unsustainable and even obsolete. Dutch urban development has always excelled at long-term planning, joining all parties involved in moving step by step towards the carefully designed end goal. Into this process, the very Dutch art of making compromises along the way has been calculated from the start. The crisis is now forcing politicians and real estate developers alike to abandon the long term end goal in urban project after project.

For De Tolhuistuin and the surrounding area this means that the process of gentrifying Noord, which seemed logical and attractive to the big players just a couple of years ago, is now in limbo. Our arts centre, of course, was meant to attract a new, creative and affluent class of people to this side of the river. Which would then proceed to settle their companies and livelihood in the new or renovated neighborhoods around. Today, nobody could predict with a straight face that this is indeed about to happen. The new challenge for places like De Tolhuistuin is how to survive in harsh economic times, by combining new ideas with the old qualities that are already present and not about to disappear anytime soon.

Question marks

To this new arts centre, this confusion is a blessing in disguise. Gone is the ambivalence of bringing new people and ideas into an messy old neighborhood, of which the traditional atmosphere would be inevitably erased in the process. Now, we have no choice but to look for ways to hook up our new collective effort with what remains of the collective spirit in the neighborhood. How can we expand our cooperative model into a neighborhood where the top-down transformation will have to be replaced by small-scale, grassroots, day to day improvements to the quality of life?

And will the bigger players be able and willing to adjust to this new reality? Will they still provide financial and logistical interventions without being able to calculate in advance where and how the returns on their investments will appear?

Human nature in a market society

Downside of the shrinking economy is that most people – and artists are no exception – respond by turning inwards to guard their own interest first. An understandable reflex, but hardly productive when sharing responsibility is the only way out. Even more troubling is to discover now, more than ever, how deeply most of us have come to embody the market mentality. Time is an investment, we say, making a profit is an integral part of the excitement, safeguarding one's own privileges always trumps taking on someone else's burden.

De Tolhuistuin is not immune to human nature in times of crisis. More and more, people here start keeping their resources, networks and facilities to themselves, instead of joining forces in order to keep the horizon wide open. Now that the original idea – open to all sides – is more vital to a confused society than ever, private survival strategies are at odds with the mission to make this, and Noord in general, the place to be.

Revolutionary impulses

Enter Tahrir Square and Zuccotti Park. To the Dutch, looking out for alternatives to their cherished long-term planning, the squares of the rebellious world have been both a source of inspiration and of caution.

Yes, the energy has been contagious. De Tolhuistuin too, opened its Civilization Square on Friday afternoon all summer. People of all backgrounds met to discuss alternatives to our current system.

And though I am convinced that serious alternatives will be developed in Holland too, making the best of our art of compromise, in its first phase the inspiration triggered little else here but a short-lived echo of ill-defined and hardly focused revolutionary thrills. In De Tolhuistuin, this meant the sudden excitement of planning to squat our own main building, the former Shell cantina, still under construction. The real scope of this 21st century revolution, to break open stagnant systems in order to include people like those living down the road, in order to improve their level of existence as well as our own, hardly entered the discussions.

The exclusion of parties

Celebrating the arts and the excitement of bringing people together at a new centre like ours teaches you two things. One is the insatiable energy of the crowds, big or small, to get together and feed on the dynamics of the moment to look ahead and plan things bigger and better. Two is how easily these crowds tend to be exclusive, to rule out anyone who doesn't fit into the unspoken codes of those present. For a centre that aims to be open to all sides this is a constant challenge. Especially when this centre is implicitly trying to show that yes, it is possible to live and work together, even in these stressful times, and to go on and imagine another society where the same openness of mind can result in living, housing, playing and working circumstances that do justice to exactly the wide range of people that is pleasantly surprised run into each other here.

The inevitability of alternatives

The place practically dictates another way of building a city together. Looking out across to the stultified, museum-like city centre, bordering on a grand but failed up-market urban development zone, down the road from a deteriorated working-class area in need of an authentic future, De Tolhuistuin can only become the new place to be if everyone involved understands the necessity of sharing the responsibility for improving the surroundings for both the newcomers and the old inhabitants of Noord, in a way that does justice to everyone and includes whatever qualities they have. The time and the place could not have been more perfectly chosen.