

Common Wealth of Co-existence

August Allebéplein, Stadsdeel Slotervaart, Amsterdam

I have a different idea of a universal. It is of a universal rich with all that is particular, rich with all the particulars there are, the deepening of each particular, the coexistence of them all.

Aime Cecaire

With the blinders of today's dominant ideologies it is difficult to see the common, even though it is all around us. Neoliberal government policies have sought in recent decades to privatize the common, making cultural products – such as housing, public space, information, ideas, and even species of animals and plants – into private property. Out of the privatization of the common emerged a splintering, at times even chaotic, landscape of deterioration like the one we find on the August Allebéplein in Amsterdam today. Exclusive alternatives dealing with private or public space will not solve the problem. Public space these days has become commercial; a scripted space of shopping and leisure. And the unknown knocking at the door is no longer welcome in the private sphere. Preferably your neighbour should be just like you. What we need instead is a political project instituting the common across false alternatives – beyond private or public space.

The Modern idea, based on universal ideas of the common – as developed by Van Eesteren in the new towns of Amsterdam – is no option either. We should not lapse into older, discredited models of totalitarian, authoritarian governance or return to romantic models of participatory democracy. What we are involved in is a complex emancipatory struggle what kind of aesthetic and political experiences can be developed transferring the universal to an idea of the common where the particular histories of populations, living together at a specific local spot, can blossom. The many different cultures, histories, and futures, present at the August Allebéplein could meet each other, once a platform of common wealth would make its appearance as a new the public sphere in Slotervaart.

Celebrating difference, a culture of plurality as Post-modernism had in mind, is not the kind of open city this project is after. Such an idea of openness too easily falls victim to aesthetic collages without ethical direction. The co-existence of different cultures and their histories in an urban area such as the Allebéplein will only blossom when they share a common ground where each particular culture can express and represent itself without the need to submerge in consensus. A new mode of co-existence (dissensus) should emerge at the August Allebé square that results in a culture of ambivalence. While many different cultures in Slovervaart take the stage in this urban project – at times even through what “others” consider their cliché's – their cultural expressions (ideas, knowledge, affects, images, codes, social relations and the like) should stay always incomplete; “forcing” them to make connections with other worlds surrounding them on the common ground they share. Mixture at social scales, maximize and optimise mixtures of various sorts that recognize plurality as a starting point rather than a destination. This can mean scaling down the mixtures to the individual building and building up something more common at a larger scale; or it can mean interspersing what is common, in the form of schools, medical centres, transportation and other shared services, with what is unique. It can also mean recognizing the needs of those who are not officially part of the mix, such as the informal workers on whom local and regional economies often depend.

Elements of Estrangement & Program

Through several elements and strategies of estrangement, and program the different cultural and social worlds are invited (and provoked) to meet on the stage of the city in Slotervaart.

1) Platform of Commonwealth; allowing the Multitude to blossom

The splintering and fragmented landscape of neo-liberalism of the existing Allebéplein and its surroundings is stopped short by a huge monumental platform (400 by 120 metres) acting as a public sphere with a height of 40 cm (two steps). It is a universal platform (infrastructure) where each particular civilisation – with its formal institutions and informal activities in this neighbourhood, is invited to take the public stage. This platform as urban void operates like an urban theatrical stage; all kind of activities, present actualities and historical representations start to relate, confront and meet each other. As soon as you introduce a luxurious pedestrian platform (a rare opportunity in Amsterdam) people will feel invited. Furthermore the marble platform functions as an urban plinth; allowing the public to see the city and its artefacts consciously: seeing a train in the distance besides a huge urban stair with all kinds of public facilities or a mosque in front of an infrastructure of public housing while being unlighted by a huge screen as part of an open air theatre.

2) The Rescue of History. Archaeological Excavations

Two cultural histories in particular take the stage on Allebé Square through their architectural representations. The High Modernism of Van Eesteren planning (and its existing housing block(s)), representing Dutch culture after the 2nd World War, and Muslim culture represented by a Mosque and its two minarets. Muslim culture is an intrinsic part of Dutch civilisation. Instead of jeopardized or disqualifying Muslim culture any longer, one of its greatest Mosques in Istanbul (Sultanahmet, or Blue Mosque 1603-17) is being excavated at Allebé square. In the basement (with glass platform tiles), around the excavation of the mosque's traditional cupolas, we find spaces to wash. The old mosque (as Islamic community centre) is connected with the new one and has a special Islamic courtyard cemetery (the only one of its kind and size in the Netherlands) behind the new public housing facility. With these architecture excavations the plan hopes to overcome the propagation of just one exclusive civilization. The real question we should ask ourselves as a civilization is whether we wish to work on cultures that are divorced from each other or whether we want to head in a more integrated direction; one that is probably more difficult but also more fruitful. Instead of propagating a 'clash of civilizations' we should investigate what it can mean to be modern in a global world in which all cultures are inextricably connected with each other. Embracing difference, instead of any euro-Islam consensus, can actually have an emancipating effect.

3) Public Housing as the Infrastructure of Society

We have to revitalize public housing (for rent) especially in the aftermath of a mortgage foreclosure crisis and increasingly nonurban areas. Cities can become more sustainable when we start to densify them. And new types of houses are urgently needed after the end of the nuclear family. The "high" public housing tower with public functions on the top floor (such as a restaurant) not only relates to the ring road of Amsterdam and its high towers in the park on the other side, but also gives the Allebé square a frontal direction and limit.

4) Piranesian Infrastructure. Underground Shopping

The platform of commonwealth is lifted (4.5 metre) at the Jan Tooropstraat. The Jan Tooropstraat is transformed into a "piranesian" space that gives access to the parking, the underground shopping malls, delivery services and other necessary traffic facilities. While the platform facilitates (free Wi-Fi), small kiosks for shop owners and two restaurants with terraces, all the multinational (uniform)

supermarket is located underneath the commonwealth platform. The roofs of the supermarkets (Albert Heijn, and Lidl) consist of transparent platform tiles through which consumer culture at large can be spied from above (endless checkout counters can be seen from the running track or the platform itself).

5) The Arena of Stairs and Public Institutions

The school, the fitness club, sport club, the library and other public programming is located at the Arena of Public Stairs. The library is located at the top of the public stairs with a magnificent view over the city (and is reachable by elevator too). The public stairs can be used for the open-air cinema but also other public performances on the square. Many open-air sports can take place on top of the elevated part of the platform near the Arena of Stairs building (on top of the parking). With the arrival of Modernism the role of the Church (and God) diminished and the library (and school (the new centres of rational and scientific knowledge) took its stage on the square. The role of public institutions and public activities (including the one of religion) should regain power at the square again. Large scale shopping and other to be efficient activities should retreat from direct publicness.