

The Spotlight

The project *Spotlight* (eng. *Spotlight*) is an initiative of artist Hieke Pars and architect Iris Schutten. The *Spotlight* consists of a number of lamps that look like ordinary street lights, yet they are specially designed with their own autonomous solar energy collectors, feeding a battery that could last for up to two years.¹ The *Spotlight* lamps are spread around the Amsterdam district of Spaarndammerbuurt, in places chosen by twenty two project participants (in one case a group), according to their personal ideas or feelings about the place. Unrelated to one another, each participant has been separately invited by Pars and Schutten. Some live in the neighbourhood, others are professionally involved in the arts, urban planning and design. An observation made by nearly all during their individual searches for 'their' spots, was the amount of existing street light, the lack of unlit underpasses or corners. Whether due to housing density, excessive urban planning or preventive safety measures, the night never quite falls on the Spaarndammerbuurt. Once the lamps are in place, no written explanation will accompany the *Spotlight* lamps on the reasons for the participants' selection of the site.²

What is at stake?

The Spaarndammerbuurt dates from the late nineteenth century. It was built to host a working class that moved from the countryside to work at the harbour of Amsterdam. Up to the present day there are still some of the old housing blocks. Most known are those of the second decade of the twentieth century, designed by the Amsterdam School architect Michel de Klerk with the new workers especially in mind. Entering from the side of the city centre the Spaarndammerstraat, the district's central axis, these housing blocks are located especially two streets to the left. The buildings are somewhat heavy brick constructions, apartments inside are small and basic, but the facades are full of interesting and playful artistic details, such as the shapes and sizes of windows or the rhythmic variety of projecting stairwells and balconies. In fact to enter the Spaardammerstraat, one goes first under a railway bridge that appears like a gate to the neighbourhood and is flanked on top by two figurative, relief sculptures. In the opinion of the Amsterdam School architects the artistic refinement of the architecture, complete with symbolic meanings, was meant as a tool for the educational and spiritual uplift of the working class newcomers to

¹ Technical design by Dynamicon (subsidiary company to Nuon).

² A brochure of the project is available at art-related venues including the Veemvloer at the Spaarndammerbuurt), but nowhere directly near the *Spotlight* lamps.

city life. The art was waiting for them. Architects and artists, with the best of intentions, knew what was good for these people.

Up to the present day the Spaardammerbuurt feels like a working class quarter. Buildings around its streets, dating from various decades of the twentieth century and erected mostly for low class social housing by architects less sensitive to detail than de Klerk, are indeed rather simple and densely built.

In the past years there has been major reconstruction and renovation of streets and buildings. This regeneration has not as yet changed significantly the neighbourhood's character. Two striking characteristics of the district even for a first-time visitor are the density of habitation, and that some fifty percent of the present population are foreigners, to a large part Muslims. Beyond the north and east limits of the Spaardammerbuurt - the Van Diemenstraat and Houtmankade respectively - huge buildings once related to the harbour have also been renovated and new ones are currently underway. These are meant for wealthier residents and businesses.

Compared to the days of de Klerk, today's city planners, architects and artists have scaled down their ambitions with regard to how deeply art in public spaces could influence people's character and education. Nonetheless, the interest in having art in public spaces seems today to be as alive as ever.

"Terrains Vagues"

The sociologist and economist Saskia Sassen is known for her studies on the 'global city'. Amongst other concepts she has been writing about "terrains vagues". These are spaces that:

'are part of the interiority of a city, yet lie outside of its organising utility-driven logics and spatial frames. They are "terrains vagues" that allow many residents to connect to the rapidly transforming cities in which they live, and to bypass subjectively the massive infrastructures that have come to dominate more and more spaces in their cities.³

Saskia Sassen sees art initiatives in the form of either ephemeral or permanent, site- or community- specific projects as potentially valuable agents in a subjective making of the urban within the spaces of these "terrains vagues".⁴ A scaled-down and nuanced making of the city for which massive city programming projects - so dominant also in the Netherlands - mostly do not have the capacity or interest to accommodate.

³ Published in the web journal Static #4, http://static.londonconsortium.com/issue04/pdf/sassen_publicinterventions.pdf as in 7/06/2007

⁴ *Ibid*

But what would be the use of adding artworks in a district as densely occupied as the Spaarndammerbuurt? Thinking of the overabundance of street lights, there seem to be hardly any “terrains vagues” left after the organisation and use of space. Besides, what common aesthetic denominators could or should an artist find for cultural groups as diverse as, for instance, traditional Dutch working class and Muslim families of various ethnic backgrounds?⁵

We see today that artists who work in public spaces come up with ideas and projects that are as basic and generic in their propositions as possible. In the sense that they function more like open suggestions or invitations, rather than as round-up statements. Especially for the case of the over-planned, over-organised, over-controlled and over-inhabited spaces of Dutch urban environments, one could take as example the increasing interest in artistic research projects – often instead of or as artworks - that look for possibilities rather than for answers. In *Spotlicht* the range of open possibilities is to be found, for instance, in the selection of each spot that is personal as much as it remains anonymous. Also in the active involvement of people – invited participants, residents - but without designating them as such or such social groups for the needs of the project. Furthermore, the neutral design of the *Spotlicht* lamp, the subjectivity of what is lit and the lamps ambiguous ownership, all render *Spotlicht* an open offer, rather than an artist’s signature piece.

With their discreet and modest presence in numerous places, the *Spotlicht* lights presents an opportunity to attract one’s attention to unnoticed details of the neighbourhood, either by selecting a spot or simply passing it by chance. There are nineteen lights in fixed spots and two specially designed for backpacks, to travel with their users. Upon a random encounter while passing by a *Spotlicht*, one might like it or ignore it, take it off or abandon it, stand and stare at it or rush away. One might be entertained by the obscure reasons of its presence or condemn the uselessness of local authorities for mindlessly placing street lights.

Despite being an utterly utilitarian object of austere design, these lamps in Spaarndammerbuurt can scarcely be regarded as functional. Simply because there is no need for extra light anywhere, where the *Spotlicht* lamps have been placed on account of the participants’ idiosyncratic selection of places, as well as the overabundance of light. In that way, it is not only the decision of the artists, but also the neighbourhood’s reality that render the

⁵ These examples do by no means exhaust the diversity of the district’s population. There are also students, young couples and any other people looking for relatively affordable housing within Amsterdam, whether through the social housing system or the free market.

ordinary, originally utilitarian object of the lamp an *artistic* intervention in the public space. In the sense of being something redundant, an excess to reality's requirements.

As an excess, the spotlight becomes another kind of "terrain vague", a metaphorical one. Not as an unseized by 'utility-driven logics' (Sassen) terrain, but because it surrenders the spot to unequivocal meanings. As such it emphasises the lack of vague spaces, places left over after the advent of city programmers and planners.

A "terrain vague" can also be the gesture of the two artists who had no practical interest whatsoever to offer this playful and simultaneously thought-provoking detail, discreetly enriching a neighbourhood that is not theirs. Their offer opened up the possibility for an intervention of subjectivities in the public space. Subjectivities that are otherwise not allowed to leave there any visible traces.

The injection to an urban environment of an art project like *Spotlicht* as a gesture of creating a "terrain vague", rather than the making of art in pre-existing urban "terrain vagues", functions as an interpretational tool for understanding the conditions within which we live out our urban experience. Simultaneously it also functions as the activation of a tactic for and by inhabitants to regain what at an unsuspected time has been ostracised from public spaces - the traces of their individual presence.

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