

AMSTERDAM NOTES – Mitchell Rasor

Amsterdam has the second largest preserved historic core in Europe. However, the city is an evolving model of form and fluidity defying easy categorization. Meyer en Van Schooten's End of the World building (1997-2000) on Java Island is part of Amsterdam's long tradition of shifting urbanism, to a large degree defined by an intricate relationship between economics, water and housing. With fluid urbanism, only money flows uphill, but the Dutch have long absorbed this inevitable cost as part of everyday architecture and infrastructure. This is as applicable to a 17th Century flood control dyke and pump system as it is to a 21st Century firewall and internet system controlling the flow of information.

There will always be sea changes in Amsterdam's economy and urbanism, but the more things change the more they stay the same. Architectural form is not radically reinvented every six months like magazines and some architects lead us to believe. Architectural typologies are amazingly consistent over time and so is our ability to forget this.

One night returning to Java Island the taxi driver pointed to an abandoned dockland building housing a squat. He previously worked as a butcher and knew for a fact that after years as a meat storage facility the walls of the building became feet thick with ice. In the 1970's the building was decommissioned as part of the general demise of Amsterdam's eastern docklands, now called the Eastern Harbour District. He said it took one year for the building to thaw and all the while ice melt rained down on the street below. I envisioned the street temporarily closed during the filming of a postindustrial Dutch remake of Singin' in the Rain crossed with On the Waterfront. One actor sings and dances in the fake rainstorm, celebrating life and love after a long night of writing computer code while the camera pulls back to show another actor falling to his knees, his pained expression conveying the futility and angst of contemporary life without a postgraduate degree in semiotics. He sings out in Dutch, 'I could have been a contender!'

Maybe the melting building is an urban myth. In any case, the story raises issues of authenticity and hype in regards to the recent tulip mania like craze for Dutch architecture and design. And at a more universal level, the melting building is an apt symbol of the perpetual freeze and thaw cycles of remembering and forgetting in architecture and urban design; a vicious cycle of hubris that Roberto Meyer and Jeroen van Schooten have avoided for more than 20 years in a steady series of progressively complex projects and forms working at the level of urban design.

As I learned more about the history of the Eastern Harbour District and its current status as an architectural showcase and urban design triumph, I became aware of my own misguided ideas of the District and of Amsterdam as the godhead of urbanism. The rainy week I spent living in a converted cargo building on Surinamekade on KNSM Island, just a few minutes from Meyer en Van Schooten's End of the World building (Einde van de Wereld) on Java Island and directly in front of a small island and pier in the River IJ where ships dock to recalibrate their compasses, gave me time to orient myself, providing a fresh perspective of not only Meyer en Van Schooten's work, but also the master plan to redevelop Amsterdam's waterfront from abandoned industrial docklands into a new spatial arrangement reflecting the economy of culture and information. Roberto Meyer and Jeroen van Schooten have completed or are working on five key architectural projects spread though out the approximately 5,000 meter long IJ waterfront redevelopment area.

The city is continually transforming and every generation of planners and architects has the utopian recipe for sustainable urbanism. But architecture and urban design are human endeavors shot through with both revelations and blind spots. The cities and buildings we make and remake are looking more and more like "what does our blindness look like?" Henri Lefebvre's rhetorical question regarding our inability to recognize the patterns of our own lives, responding with appropriate urbanism and architecture. Or may be as Mark Wigley writes, "architecture may simply be the name given to a certain lag relative to the speed of change."

And the speed of change is on everyone's mind. From ads for free "roaming minutes" to people buying real estate over the internet, one would think that daily life as we know it is over, that space and time finally collapsed into each other's arms from exhaustion. But our cities are not evaporating into data clouds without legible form. Space and time are still relative; it just takes more time to find a parking space.

We have witnessed, particularly with colonial nations, a seesawing of the world economy, but for better or worse architecture remains at the fulcrum. Urbanism as we knew it or as our parents or grandparents knew it may be gone, but this has been over the course of years of decentralization and disinvestment in cities. Change is inevitable and as the economy sloshes back and forth in an ever-greater basin, architecture and the city bring a consistency of form to what some call globalization, but most call making a living.

Regardless of free trade, globalization of markets and the rise of information as a commodity, the city is still here. Architecture is still here and Meyer en Van Schooten are making competent, beautiful and useful buildings. These buildings are often of mixed-use, encouraging urbanism through the simultaneous application of form, program and

theory. The idea that Meyer en Van Schooten are master builders avoiding theory by working in a positive pressure clean room keeping out the dirt of ideas and meaning is ridiculous.

The information age has not really reshaped space into new forms although many architects are scared stiff and contorted into new forms just thinking about it. Building, street and city typologies have a logic dating back centuries. It is true that cities have become more sprawling and the location of jobs and housing continue to shift, but from the beginning cities have expanded outward and have relied on a regional footprint to support the city core.

Just as merchants, shipbuilders and trading companies needed to be located along the IJ, new companies want to be located closer to major highways, ring roads and Schipol Airport. Most people refer to Meyer en Van Schooten's ING House as a boot. But this highly visible building from Amsterdam's ring road is better described as a modern trading vessel moored to the suburban economy of data, roads, housing and international travel. Technology has not changed the way we use space as much as it has allowed us to work with time and information in a more flexible manner. Roberto Meyer and Jeroen van Schooten have not been hypnotized by the blur and blob rhetoric. Their work remains tangible and solid even while continuing to explore transparency, light, massing and form.

We can find faster ways to communicate and transfer information, cheating space of its dominion, but we can't make more space. Well, the Dutch make more land, but I am speaking of space in existential terms. For instance, the night before leaving for a trip to Amsterdam, I was working late on a project due the next day. At one point I realized I could stop working, go to bed, get on the plane the next day to Europe gaining six hours on the deadline and then email my report back to the United States. But the point is that I traveled from a restored 19th Century New England building to a restored 19th Century Dutch warehouse and everything looked almost the way it did a hundred years ago. The Ethernet cable and the airplane are the radical architectures in this scenario.

This is a very different image than the postcard in front of me as I write. It shows Dutch colonials in their whites standing on a dock in Suriname (formerly Dutch Guiana) with a Dutch steamer entering the harbor. This ship was the radical architecture of the time. As Jaap Evert Abrahamse notes in his essay, "Amsterdam on the Sea", even as far back as the 17th Century the Dutch referred to city expansion and the shipping industry as "see-bauw", or "sea building", as if the expansion of the Amsterdam port and docklands was one in the same with the expansion of trade across the globe.

The ship entering the harbor in Suriname was the link with home. The ship carried Dutch personal effects one way and returned with tobacco, coffee and other commodities to places just like Java Island in Amsterdam. The room where I am writing was once piled high with these very same bales of tobacco. Now it is the studio of a photographer known for his portraits of actors and supermodels. The location of Meyer en Van Schooten's End of the World building was the location of the former End of the World bar where sailors drank and debauched between long voyages. The End of the World now includes a restaurant called, After the End, where IT specialists and young architects come to eat, drink and debauch after a long day of debugging a pornography website or detailing a wall that becomes a floor that becomes a ceiling.

The docklands of the Eastern Harbour District are now known as the neighborhoods of Java and KNSM Island, Borneo and Sporenburg and the Abbator and Veemaarkt Sites in Entrepot-West. The various neighborhoods of the Eastern Harbour District were built in phases and have their own master plans, style and scales of architecture, densities, demographics and overall sense of place. Individual books have been written about the different neighborhoods and just recently a book documenting the entire area was published. Meyer en Van Schooten's End of the World Project is located on the contiguous island/dockland of KNSM and Java Island, distinguished from each other by wide-angle bend at the center of the island. The bent shape of the island echoes the current waterfront, but looking at a map of the city you can see the angled form far inland in the orientation of the Plantage Middenlaan and the Zeeburgerdijk created hundreds of years ago.

The Eastern Harbour District is due east following the waterfront of the IJ from Central Station at the heart of historic Amsterdam. It is the far eastern anchor of an ambitious Amsterdam waterfront project intended to counter the centrifugal movement of jobs and housing to the periphery, creating a mixed-use, postindustrial waterfront extending from the Eastern Harbor District to the Silodam designed by MVRDV west of Central Station.

KNSM retains many of the former dockland structures intertwined with new buildings by Wiel Arets, Diener and Diener and a wonderful twisting brick monolith by Hans Kollhoff and Christian Rapp. KNSM also maintains its urban feel by having a boulevard down the center of the island as well roads along the shore. Open space is intermingled and tough. Even the plaza at the center of the south facing side is completely paved. People strolling the shore or cutting across the plaza negotiate the soccer players running from one end of the plaza to the other. Soccer goals are just part of the streetscape made up of benches, cafes, giant steps down to the water and a colorful assortment of houseboats jumbled on the bulkhead.

On the other hand, Java Island is not a mix of the old and the new. There are no remnants of the former industrial use. The highly differentiated striated canal style buildings are parallel to the water in a uniform height of six to eight stories and a uniform width creating a building wall around the entire outside edge of the island. A narrow quay style road and walk separate the buildings from the IJ. The inside of the island is a series of large pedestrian gardens.

The super block approach is an efficient use of a narrow site allowing most units views of both the water and the interior gardens. The building wall surrounding the island is broken by four narrow north to south canals and a series of large civic scale openings cut into the surrounding wall of buildings. The most common critical complaint about the master plan is that the canals are silly appropriations of the historic city center canals, completely out of scale and character with the with the open, tough expanse of the IJ.

The narrow canals are nostalgic and the whimsical footbridges make their presence even more superfluous and quaint given the location. However, the north south cuts provided by the canals create sequential, cinematic views from the interior gardens of either the IJ and northern Amsterdam or south across the water to the Oostelijke Handelskade. As you move down the length the island, the canal crossings create a rhythm in the change of grade allowing for interesting ramp and stair opportunities.

Java Island is a wonderful place to live, especially for families with children needing a more safe and quiet setting than the city center. At the very worst Java Island is a 70% market rate-housing ghetto with all the aspects of urbanism except urbanity. To be more specific, the Eastern Harbour District and specifically Java Island is damned to a future of residential monoculture.

Even though the previous conditions were distinctly urban/industrial there was urbanity. The land and buildings were created to maximize dock space, storage of goods and distributions systems, but there was also housing, bars, brothels and restaurants like the color of a Dickens novel.

When Amsterdam city planners began the process of redevelopment the Eastern Waterfront District in the 1970's they did not want a repeat of the Bijlmer in southeastern Amsterdam. The Bijlmer is a Le Corbusian style masterpiece of high-rise residential towers set in a picturesque landscape that Rem Koolhaas calls the Las Vegas of the Welfare State. The form of the neighborhood is high modern 20th architecture set in a 17th century pastoral landscape and people are expected to live in

this void of aesthetics and time. The Bijlmer lacks urbanity because there are no streets. The buildings and landscape are not human scaled and most importantly it lacks a mix of uses. At one time this was seen as the ideal, hygienic form for urban dwelling.

Post Bijlmer but previous to the Eastern Waterfront planning, OMA prepared a master plan for a site directly across from Java Island called IJ-plein. In the IJ-plein, long blocks of identical buildings are placed perpendicular to the water. Looking at the IJ-plein from Amsterdam you see the ends of the buildings, appearing like loods or dock warehouses. This neo-modernist project is more in scale with the historic city center, but the layout is distinctly modern in its repetitive strips of parking, housing and green space minus a street or canal system to provide a civic framework. However, for postmodern planners IJ-plein was still not fuzzy enough and the city planners wanted to turn the clock back even further, looking to the historic city center as a model for development in the Eastern Waterfront District.

People had high hopes for the Eastern Waterfront District and the mix of old timers and alternative life stylers already living there saw its funky recycling of existing buildings as a logical starting point for a new mixed-use neighborhood arising from local conditions. The squatters went so far as to hire an architect to prepare their own master plan for presentation as an alternative to city sanctioned master plans. But due to extreme housing shortages and a booming economy during the redevelopment of the Eastern Harbour District, the housing market abhorred a vacuum and Java Island quickly became the place it remains today. What a few people already calling Java Island home wanted and what the current population housed in the 8,000 units in the Eastern Harbour District wanted ended up being two very different places. It happened quickly. Java Island is a good example of form and civic process lagging behind the pace of the market.

When Meyer en Van Schooten were commissioned to make a building on Java Island it was on the spot of the squatters' last stand. In the original master plan for Java Island prepared by Sjoerd Soeters, one remnant shipping related building was to be kept in the master plan, The building was called The End of the World and was a squat formerly housing the End of the World bar. Due to soil contamination and the squatters losing the lawsuit with the developer, the building was considered uninhabitable and torn down. The Java Island building ring wall now had a vulnerable gap and the prevailing market rushed to fill this last space. The architecture of late capitalism. All 29 units were sold at a subsidized market rate of 87,000 euros according to a ratio formula for the developer's total units on Java Island.

Meyer en Van Schooten's End of the World project is just one brick in the wall of Java Island and it does not jump out as a particularly brilliant piece of architecture compared to the other buildings, but reserved is the point and the form alone is not what makes it a unique piece of urban architecture. Many of the buildings on Java Island are too expressionistic and 'lively' and already look dated, or at least tired of posing for all the camera-wielding architects roaming the area.

The End of the World is a beautiful, restrained ten-story brick building. The internal programming creates 29 one or two bedroom units each zig-zagging vertically one and a half stories. This allows each unit to have different levels of living space, varied views of the IJ to the north and balconies overlooking the interior courtyard to the south. The north façade is crisp, brick and monolithic with tension variations provided by deep set fenestrations, some with glass balustrades, three window cubes rising above the roofline, breaking the plane of the façade, a three storey high asymmetrically aligned civic gateway clad in red panels and a large sixth floor glass wall revealing a hallway. I saw two boys playing soccer in the hall, the ball bouncing off the glass. Cantilevered balconies on south facing interior courtyard articulate the wall, creating deep cast shadows on the brick.

What is significant about End of the World is that in a sea of housing, Meyer and Van Schooten increased the height of the building by one story above the other buildings, freeing up the two ground floor spaces for commercial uses. By coincidence, one of the master planned civic scale openings in the Java Island building wall was required at The End of the World site. The tall and inviting gateway acts like a small side street connecting the gardens to the street whereas the other gateways are not as inviting and are more like open air lobbies for the housing above. The End of the World gateway is also unique because if one stands in the garden court it frames a dialectical view of an industrial complex - a view not only to the north but also to the past reminding us of the original conditions of Java Island. The only bus stop along the northern side of the island is located at the steps to the End of the World. Watching the bus arrive in the gateway, temporarily blocking the view of the IJ with a crowd of faces, is a typical quick cut moment taken for granted in the city, but a rupture in the calm of Java Island.

On one side of the gateway, the brick façade of the buildings runs straight to the ground floor commercial space currently housing a film production office. However, on the other side of the gateway the commercial space appears to be a red block wedged under the building, jutting into the garden and then transitioning into a glass cube. Many of the buildings on Java Island have masses jutting into the interior court, but this is the only fully transparent commercial space in the entire system of garden courts. Meyer en van Schooten did not miss the opportunity that every other architect failed to realize: the

interior gardens are not private space, but common civic space and inserting commercial spaces into the garden adds a valuable twist of urbanity.

The glass cube and red block commercial space is the location of a well-known restaurant called Voorbij het Einde, or After the End. When strolling through the interior gardens at night and you come across the glowing glass box filled with people eating, your first impression is of an extremely large family gathering or party, but then you realize it is a restaurant filled with diners. It is a moment of perfectly acceptable public behavior, but in this residential zone, people watching, which is one of the great pleasures of city life, feels voyeuristic and this is a telling emotion about the lack of urbanity on Java Island.

The End of the World is a microcosm of how all of Java Island could have been developed: housing with a careful blending of urban forms and uses creating a more dynamic neighborhood. Roberto and Jeroen not only met the required housing numbers, but also pushed the program and the form to a level of urbanism otherwise absent from Java Island. The End of the World seems to be the perfect middle ground between what the city planners wanted, what the squatters wanted, what the market demanded and ultimately what smart architecture can add to the city.

Java Island was never meant to be a replica of the historic city center and it was definitely not meant to repeat the form and concepts of the Bijlmer. Java Island was to be a compromise of the two, a mid point on the sliding scale between the low-rise high density and urbanism of the city and the high-rise high-density suburbanism of the Bijlmer. Java Island did become this middle ground, but be careful what you wish for.

Maybe Java Island is the new urban paradigm: low-rise high-density within the city limits, but with a limited urbanity due to a long running segregation of uses as the foundation of city planning. This is exacerbated by the market setting the pace and timeframe for the spatial configurations of working, living and playing. The End of the World at least proves that one building can sustain a mix of uses and that architects can play a critical role in shaping contemporary cities at a quiet local scale, not just the international grand gestures of city branding typified by Gehry in Bilbao. The End of The World is also a symbolic work of middle ground urban architecture as the location of a bus stop half way along the 59 Line running from Central Station in the historic core to the Le Corbusian periphery of the Bijlmer.