

The Cook, the Farmer, His Wife and Their Neighbour

The on-site project The Cook, the Farmer, His Wife and Their Neighbour consists of a community garden and a community kitchen in the Nieuw West district of Amsterdam. This was a collaborative project initiated by the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, which lacked a permanent exhibition space in 2009 and so pursued various activities in other locations in the city. Soon after the Stedelijk Museum invited me to do a project in Nieuw West, I discovered that Wilde Westen, a collective made up of a cultural producer, a sociologist, two architects, two designers and an artist, had already carried out research there the year before, so we joined forces as the core group behind the project. Over the year in which The Cook, the Farmer, His Wife and Their Neighbour developed, however, the neighbourhood residents themselves became the most important people involved, and after Harvesting Day, on September 27, 2009, they took over its management. They formed a committee of eight residents, which is responsible for the two spaces. During the six months the project was taking shape, Wilde Westen and I had the role of mediators between the neighbourhood residents, the municipality and the Far West Housing Corporation. Today we serve on an advisory board that also includes representatives from the Stedelijk, Far West, Koers Nieuw West and the Geuzenveld-Slotermeer district authorities; we meet as needed with the residents' committee to discuss the life of the project.

The interest this project has generated is not surprising. With its focus on local food production and neighbourhood development, it redefines the state of urban-rural coexistence and contributes to the network of green and garden areas in the city, which have a similar intention. I'm very proud that the community garden and community kitchen have generated new connections between neighbours and between the neighbourhood and the municipality. Right from the start, the project has attracted the many individuals, local initiatives and institutions to get involved. It offers a good example of redirective practice, i.e. a collective form of action that demonstrates a process of cultural remaking. Community develops from working together in ways that transcend the limits of any one discipline.

The community garden and community kitchen are located on Lodewijk van Deysse Street in the Geuzenveld district, which is part of the post-war modernist development of West Amsterdam. Today, however, it faces the problems of widespread

unemployment and difficulties in integrating new arrivals. At the same time, Nieuw West is one of the largest residential redevelopment areas in the European Union. What happens here has the potential to inform the redevelopment of modernist neighbourhoods elsewhere.

As a local case study in Nieuw West, our project articulates practices designed to meet the challenges of the 21st century. The existing policy for redesigning the modernist district foresees an increase in the density of the built areas at the expense of open public space; it would also mean the relocation of low-income families. Our project, in contrast, views the current low-income population, which consists mostly of immigrant families, as an “added value” in a sustainable neighbourhood. It rejects the 20th-century modernist ideal of the metropolis and opts instead for a city composed of strong, smaller-sized neighbourhoods; in other words, it shrinks the city into smaller parts. Here the green area is preserved and its potential is activated as agricultural land, which in fact revives the memory of an area that was farmland as recently as 50 years ago. Public space is transformed from an open, undefined space into a community space. The project shows us that not only is it desirable for residents to participate in designing “their” city, but that it’s also actually possible. The project introduces a bottom-up process in an over-regulated Dutch society where residents have become passive and frustrated, while the housing corporations, which have been given carte blanche in the redevelopment of the district, simply reproduce unimaginative formal designs.

A previously unused house at Lodewijk van Deysse Street 61 is now a community kitchen and a meeting place for the community that has formed around the project. It provides a centre around which the community can engage in the process of “building a place” – a much-needed ritual in a climate where families experience continual resettlement. Beyond the core group of residents, the community kitchen attracts other residents, too, who take part in the activities there. With its open-door policy, now in effect for a full year, the community kitchen has also brought security to the street, another added value for the neighbourhood.

The community vegetable garden is located behind the kitchen on land that used to be fenced off. Today, 22 families from seven ethnic groups take care of the garden. Opening up the fenced-off lot can be understood as a form of re-appropriation of the land by the residents and a symbolic act that articulated their need to be involved in

redesigning their neighbourhood.

As I noted, Nieuw West Amsterdam was agricultural land only a half-century ago. In 1934, the architect Cornelis van Eesteren drafted a master plan for the area. Construction began soon after World War II, and a garden city, a Dutch version of modernism, was laid across the fields. As with many modernist developments, there was money for the buildings but not for developing the public space, which van Eesteren understood as playing an important role in social integration. So the public space remained largely open and undefined. This turned out to be a happy accident, since in the 1970s open space was symbolically represented of an open democratic society. During the 1980s, however, this space degenerated into a no man's land, and in the 1990s, many of the lots were fenced-off and became "for-looking-only gardens" (kijkgroen). Residents paid for the maintaining of them but could not enter them. In 2004, in the face of imminent bankruptcy, the city handed the space over to housing corporations, an act that sealed the destiny of public space in the district. Today, the link between residents and the government has been broken, while the housing corporations see no reason to maintain the open public space, which holds next to no value for them; in their view, it is only a source of continual maintenance costs and potential danger. By engaging neighbourhood residents, the project The Cook, the Farmer, His Wife and Their Neighbour overturns this perspective. The public space is personalised as community space, maintenance costs are reduced and the area becomes both more liveable and more stable. Both residents and the city gain. The space is not only reclaimed, it is also redefined. But beyond issues of space and place, the project visualises the potential of social architecture. Simply put, the community garden and community kitchen serve as catalysts of change for the community that takes shape around them, and Lodewijk van Deysse Street as a whole is transformed. It remains to be seen what sort of impact the project will have beyond the local neighbourhood.