

DIY

By Matthijs Bouw

Our market economy, while incapable of addressing the public project, brings out immense energies in individuals. One Architecture uses DIY strategies to tap into these, as a less sterile alternative to top-down spatial planning.

A real estate project, more often than not, has something rather drastic about it. It needs careful planning, with a huge pre-investment, and after the construction crews are done, it turns out that whatever was there before - tenants, functions, rent levels - is there no more. In a different age, when modernization and progress often entailed entering readily into Faustian bargains, this was not considered a problem. Sometimes, the government was even kind enough to set up a relocation programme.

In the current era, however, which rightly celebrates diversity, the results of such wholesale blueprint planning operations are suspect. Much potential richness is lost. Meanwhile, the market forces that have taken over from governments simply dismiss public agendas.

Any planning operation needs to take into account that the city is not only shaped top-down, but also by millions of individual decisions about what to use, where to invest, what to buy, where to go. Our market economy might be incapable of addressing the public project; but it does bring out immense energies in individuals.

How can these energies be tapped to shape cities or buildings, in all their richness and diversity?

DIY culture (1) has been inspirational as an alternative model from my earliest work, the Soest Day Care Centre. That's because it harnesses incredible creative energies, because its lo-fi aesthetic comes cheap, and because it allows alternative discourse.

The day care centre, for children aged 0 to 12, was to be housed in a former girl's school in Soest. The existing building was appropriately organized to shield the girls from the boys with mopeds who were inevitably lurking outside: high windows, fixed classrooms and the administration in a panoptical position at the connecting point of the two wings. Ideal, the client said, for its new function. As it was already spatially divided in easy groups, it was suggested that just adding a couple of beds and washing facilities in each classroom would keep within the low budget.

With the team of three fellow students and the young licensed architect I assembled to do this first commission, I immediately came to the conclusion that a day care centre is anything but a school. Kids go there before and after school, to learn the things that a school will not teach them: independence, limits, and sociability. A school is about control and attention; our day care centre had to be about adventure and discovery. Dismantling any resemblance to a school was our first task.



Soest Day Care Centre



Western Front's Lux ballroom in Vancouver

With most of the budget spent on demolishing the interior of the existing building, we needed to design and construct our day care centre on the cheap. By using untreated materials (and therefore avoiding the obligatory pink and blue with Miffies), leaving the building as we found it where it was not necessary to change anything (for instance, above the height of 1.50 metres), buying fixtures at HEMA (2), actively approaching sponsors and using an amalgam of real contractors, hippie carpenters and our own hands to build it, we achieved a result that turned upside down all accepted notions about the desirability of a womb-like quality for day care centres. It also showed how vital architecture could be - which is why Bart Lootsma called it one of the five most important Dutch buildings of the last decade. It has the utopian vitality that I grew up with, as a member of the post-punk generation.

In recent years, I have discovered that the DIY mentality of channelling individual creativity and energies into building communities, more than top-down spatial interventions per se, helps to make good cities. While this is a model that works easily within capitalism, where the world is shaped by millions of small individual decisions, it also allows for a utopian vision that the corporate domain has difficulty grasping, and from which governments have distanced themselves by giving up their instruments.

Normally associated with punk in the 1970s, some of the most inspiring forms of DIY can be found in North Pacific America, the area between Vancouver, BC, and Portland, OR. Starting with record label and radio station K-Recs (its slogan: "exploding the teenage underground into a passionate revolt against the corporate ogre since 1982"), based in the small college town of Olympia, WA, one now finds myriads of creative practices in

the region, all operating a 'business of utopia'. These practices use business strategies that nurture different forms of community, such as the web, barter, and collaborative work, into a vibrant scene. Work is sold in kitchen-table web stores, websites promote events and offer facilities. (3) As might be expected in this highly globalized region (50 per cent of Vancouver's population is Asian), the base of companies such as Amazon, Nike and Microsoft, the strategies of the businesses of utopia strongly mirror its corporate counterparts of the New Economy, albeit with different goals.

In 2005, One Architecture did a small temporary project at the Western Front's Lux ballroom in Vancouver. The project, an installation to house the Unassociated Writers Conference and Dance Party, was made of a ghostly linen cube with a rented bouncy castle inside it. Around it there was a makeshift café, as well as different spaces for readings. On the cube, various simultaneous readings (some of them without a live audience) were projected; the sound was adjusted so that, together with the sound of laughter of the bouncing public, the space became "an experiment in information sharing and a place in which writers and artists could commingle, display their books, read, listen, and drink champagne." (4)

The value of small-scale, non-institutional, bottom-up creative practices for the city and, by extension, the economy, is generally understood, especially since Richard Florida's books. (5) But all too often, it proves all too difficult to organize planning processes so that the richness of these practices does not get lost.

This difficulty is exemplified by the new development of the Stadswerven in Dordrecht, Holland's oldest city. These former docklands, just east of the old centre, are to be developed into a bustling, primarily residential

neighbourhood, with small shops and cultural facilities. Several years were spent developing a beautiful spatial plan for the 40 ha area, with a number of fantastic cultural facilities to be paid for with the additional land revenue that the lively and desirable development would generate. In the process of developing plans, however, the planners had been sketching buildings but forgotten to engage the artistic community. Slowly it became apparent that they were planning expensive fetish objects, empty of real cultural programs.

One Architecture developed an alternative strategy with the artists, performers and cultural institutions who had not been consulted in the initial stages of the process. We felt that the cultural parties should be stakeholders in the development, rather than passive recipients of art subsidies awarded for moving to the new area. If the premise that culture generates extra revenue from real estate is correct, then the fruits of success from the Stadswerven development should ideally be reinvested in culture.

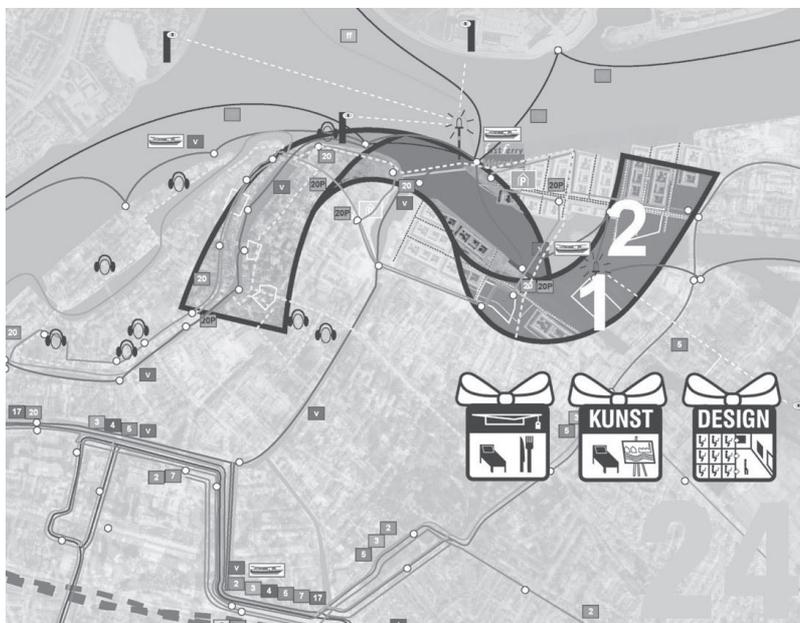
We proposed forming a Cultural Development Corporation (CDC), which, rather than receiving an annual subsidy, would be endowed with land and some of the existing monumental buildings. It could use these assets as seed capital for its (new) activities, find synergies and engage (private) partners. In a series of smaller projects, conceived by the local creative community, with its knowledge of the local context, the cultural entrepreneurs could use the CDC as a vehicle for developing Stadswerven into an exciting new addition to the centre.

The first concrete project on Stadswerven is the conversion of an old electricity plant, the Energiehuis, into a centre for youth culture, education and performances.

One Architecture discovered that the huge building could house three Dordrecht cultural institutes at a cost equivalent to their current housing costs. With an architectural proposal that reorganized the building so that its platform and offices could contain most existing programmes, the six beautiful old halls could become available for multiple use: for performances, theatre, music, and events.

Letting others enter the design process, as will happen in Dordrecht and Eindhoven, has its precursors in our Soest Day Care Centre, where all five members of the team worked on the project as though it were a cadavre exquis (6) in which all good ideas were to be realized. DIY shifts the role of the architect towards that of an urban planner, albeit on a smaller scale, partly inspired by Koolhaas' 1987 plan for the new town of Melun Sénart, and partly by the Open Building processes of the 1970s.

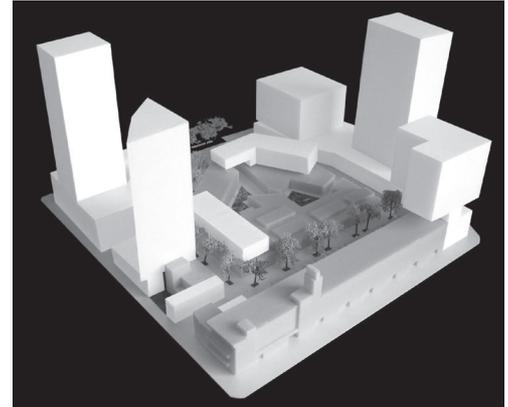
The Energiehuis proposal includes renovating the building at various levels. Some areas will become up-market and feature exciting design elements, while other areas will be given the bare essentials so as to comply with building codes and fire regulations. Having these different levels of renovation reduces the investment costs and allows for cultural institutes and other users to continue developing the building. They can use the excess (cheap) space to make operations easier, to rent out to others, or for experimentation. They can slowly grow the building by channelling their own energies into fixing it up. The excess space improves their operations and frees up time, money and energy, which can then can be invested in the community that the three institutes are shaping, a community that aims at making the Energiehuis a vital node within Dordrecht culture.



Stadswerven in Dordrecht



The Energiehuis



Viktoriakwartier

The Viktoriakwartier

One such node is already in place in Eindhoven, in the shape of the Viktoriakwartier (the Victoria Quarter). The Temporary Art Centre (TAC) is a mix of studios and galleries in a former Philips factory, inhabited by 70 creative companies and some artists. Next door is another factory that was converted into apartments in the Amsterdam School style of the 1920s, and which now houses a mix of tenants, many of whom work from home. The two building complexes are located next to the PSV Stadium, 400 metres from the city centre, an island of history and culture in an otherwise industrial area.

With the Viktoriakwartier, Eindhoven's centre can make a leap westwards. The existing qualities can become the basis for a new, high-density, mixed-used area. In developing the urban plan, however, tripling the total programme on a site that is only 30% unbuilt ran the risk of destroying the creative ecology that is already there.

The main urban intervention One Architecture proposed was to leave the TAC complex almost fully intact, to fix only the bare necessities, and to allow the people to incrementally and organically renew their building, hopefully with a combination of rough fixes and carefully crafted and designed 'jewels'. The project will literally be built around TAC, with a platform of similar height and functions extending the site, plus higher elements (studios, residential towers, a theatre/cinema complex) at a specific point on top. The brick and wood building, historically important but constructed as barracks, is easily modified. Therefore TAC is left intact, with only a slight shaving off the side to allow narrow streets to cut through it. By making these new openings glass-lined, the interior of TAC becomes public. This solution allows the artists and start-ups to remain in the area at affordable rents, while harnessing the creative energies of the

TAC members into making a building that will eventually become more interesting than any architect can have imagined.

The use of DIY strategies in the Viktoriakwartier and the Energiehuis empowers people, turning their buildings into an asset with which they can, in an entrepreneurial way, invest in their own future. An added benefit of the DIY approach is that it allows an aesthetic in the city that, from a 2005 perspective, is appreciated for its retro qualities, with its messiness easing city management and logistical issues. In the Viktoriakwartier, cars can still enter the area to make deliveries; workshops mix with stores. In Eindhoven and Dordrecht, DIY helps stave off the too abrupt gentrification and Disneyfication often associated with the regeneration of the creative quarters of a city.

Matthijs Bouw is director of the Amsterdam based office One Architecture

(1) DIY is an abbreviation of 'do it yourself.' For more on DIY culture, see Amy Spencer, *DIY: the rise of lo-fi culture*, London, 2005

(2) Low-cost Dutch chainstore, stocking (among other things) D.I.Y materials.

(3) As I discovered when doing an architectural reading/dance party tour with local bands for Clear Cut Press, a subscription-based press based in Astoria, OR, in 2005. My top-ten 'Google' hits all linked to the tour because the entire community had announced the events on its different websites.

(4) Nate Lippens, *Free Associating In Vancouver*, *The Stranger*, Seattle, April 7 2005

(5) Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, etc

(6) 'Cadavre exquis': technique and game invented by the Surrealists, in which a number of people write a poem, each one contributing a word or phrase without seeing all of the preceding line.