Contested Spaces of the Open Society

On Dutch Structuralism and Welfare State Planning

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Despite the current lament on the excesses of neo-liberal planning, the privatization of welfare state assets continues, most painfully so, by social democrats as if there were no alternative management models other than those of the market and private equity. As we know, this privatization also affects the spaces of our cities. Everywhere, quite literally, fences are erected, open spaces closed off, all sorts of connectivity disrupted, specifically in the post-war districts planned under welfare state conditions. The continuous landscape of open and collective spaces makes way for the city of enclaves, closed perimeter blocks, and private enterprise. Complete neighborhoods and districts are being dismantled, nobody monitors where the former inhabitants go and what kind of effects such enforced migration has on cities in terms of social disruption. Before the crisis brought the Dutch building industry to a full stop, the complete expansion of the Amsterdam Western Garden Cities was up for demolition by a private conglomerate of housing corporations without any proper democratic control and hardly any political objection. The amount of inhabitants facing a forced removal numbered as much as a mid-sized town such as Delft or Leiden. When innercity neighborhoods were torn down in Amsterdam, in the late 1960s and early 1970s – also in the name of large scale urban renewal – it was Aldo van Eyck who spoke of 'sociocide', thus viciously stigmatizing the responsible planners, designers, and politicians, identifying welfare state technocracy with the authoritarian regimes for which it was supposed to be the enlightened alternative. Today, we hardly hear such harsh words. Yet, with half of all Dutch banks and their private debts being nationalized, with former union banks sold to private banks and now bankrupt, with the former local councils' real estate funds sold to private parties and now bankrupt, and just as well, with the privatized housing corporations now collapsed or on the brink of collapse we'd better start to ask what the real costs of privatization add up to and if we might learn something from those days before casino capitalism and the 'creative class' started to redirect the economy and by default the forces of town planning.

The following is a tentative argument, which tries to take a fresh look at welfare state policies, in particular the planning of open and public space in our cities, not so much as a call to re-instate it, but rather to learn from what we've thrown away.[1] It situates the so-called failure of welfare state planning and its architecture in the state of the public spaces, particularly their open character. This open, all-inclusive character has proven to be untenable, notwithstanding the desirability of spaces to 'meet' for 'encounter' and 'free exchange of ideas' that we come across in the newspeak of the creative class adepts and Jane Jacobs acolytes. Paradoxically, this ideology of meeting and mixing as a precondition for a vibrant, democratic society was already at the heart of the post-war reconstruction just as it was in the case of Dutch Structuralism and the Team 10 discourse from the mid-1950s onward. Despite the all-inclusive, universalist talk of 'identity', 'community' or 'society' we are obviously looking at the construction of various different identities of the collective and the individual citizen and the concomitant fight over who is entitled to appear in public space and who not. To revisit the planning of the spaces of the democratic welfare state – or the Open Society to use Karl Popper's famous term – will thus highlight some of the inherent ideological contradictions at stake.

The Open Society

Many modern architects of the post-war period referred to the idea of an Open Society suggesting they were building towards such a society. In Team 10 circles too, it was a favorite phrase, just like the ones of 'open aesthetics'

1 My recent research has a focus on both the welfare state and Dutch structuralism, see among others: Dirk van den Heuvel, 'The Kasbah of Suburbia', in: *AA files*, nr. 62, 2011, pp. 82–89; Dirk van den Heuvel, 'Piet Blom's Domesticated Superstructures, in: *DASH (Delft Architectural Studies on Housing)*, 'The Urban Enclave', NAi Publishers, Rotterdam, 2011, pp. 56–70; Tom Avermaete, Dirk van den Heuvel (eds.), *Footprint*, Autumn 2011 (Vol. 5, nr. 2), 'The European Welfare State Project: Ideals, Politics, Cities and Buildings', Techne Press, Amsterdam.

and 'open form'. For instance, Alison and Peter Smithson stated that: "An open society needs an open city. Freedom to move and somewhere to go, both inside and outside the city."[2] They spoke of the 'open city' with an 'open center' with regard to the projects they proposed for the devastated German capital during the late 1950s and 1960s, including their famous Hauptstadt Berlin competition entry of 1957–1958.[3] This period was of course the heyday of the Cold War and the very notion of anything 'open' was tailored against the Communist threat from the East, just as it was presented as the embodiment of the humanist alternative for the defeated Nazi-Reich and its fascist and racial doctrines. And just as Popper proposed his Open Society as the alternative for any kind of 'closed' society, the architects championed their 'open aesthetic' as opposed to the 'closed aesthetic' of the past and present.[4] Despite the various references by architects to Popper, he himself didn't talk about architecture or town planning in his monumental book. Still, rereading Popper's *The Open Society,* it is not so difficult to see how his politico-ideological construct and the post-war project for the Western European welfare state as envisaged by its architects were parallel phenomena. It also helps to explain how the architects found themselves in a most ambiguous position largely due to the demands of the Open Society.

Popper's seminal publication of 1945, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, involves a still provocative rethinking of Plato's ideas on the State and the propositions of Marx and Hegel regarding the historic process, class struggle, and their assumed laws, all against the background of the question what constitutes a truly democratic and egalitarian society, in which everybody can fully participate no matter to which family or class one is born. Popper took a radical stance against historicism, totalitarianism, and what he called 'utopian engineering'. Among others, he situated the emergence of Open Societies in ancient Greece and its city states as the outcome of the emergence of commerce, trade, travelling, and migration, which in his view created a proto-urban society of 'burghers'. How the industrial revolution and the new forms of capitalism and organization of labor might or might not be compatible with such an idea of society is not quite elaborated. In his fight against totalitarian utopianism, he opposed 'blueprint' planning, a tabula rasa approach, and social engineering. At the same time, he was not against social reform or 'a rational approach to the problems of social reconstruction' as he put it himself.[5] Instead of a politics of 'utopian engineering' Popper proposed 'piecemeal engineering', allowing for experiments and re-adjustments, and learning from mistakes.[6] It should be noted that 'piecemeal' sounds much more modest than actually suggested by Popper; his phrase 'social reconstruction' is slightly ominous in this respect. By piecemeal engineering Popper could still imagine 'blueprints' for 'single institutions' such as healthcare or educational reform. Of these blueprints he would say that they were 'comparatively simple' and if they would 'go wrong', 'damage' was 'not very great, and a re-adjustment not very difficult'.[7] From today's perspective one might question the assumed simplicity at stake in these matters, but for now it might suffice to observe that Popper's position was far removed from a liberal, *laissez-faire* attitude; that it was supportive of all sorts of reformist, social democratic intervention as an alternative to the revolutions of 1917 in Russia and 1918 in Germany.[8]

Popper also defined the Open Society in more universalist terms by contrasting it with what he saw as the closed society. The latter concerns an irrational, tribal society, or in anthropological terms 'magical' with taboos, myths, and rites, which regulate everyday life as if these were equal to 'natural laws'. Instead, human reason was to be the first foundation of the Open Society, including the possibility of criticism of the institutions of society. Human laws are 'conventional laws' and can be challenged by the members of a society. Naturalism as applied to society, just as the idea of society as an organism, were refuted by Popper as principally anti-democratic and anti-humanist, since they denounce the idea of personal freedom and personal responsibility. It is at this point that Popper embraced the process of political and technological modernization, and where we find a parallel with the diagnosis made by architects of the period (if not the same). Popper wrote: "As a consequence of its loss of organic character, an open society may become, by degrees, what I should like to term an 'abstract society'. It may, to a considerable extent, lose the character of a concrete or real group of men, or of a system of such real groups. (…) Our open societies function largely by way of abstract relations, such as exchange or co-operation."[9] The 'gains' are that 'personal relationships of a new kind can arise where they can be freely entered into, instead of being determined by the accidents of birth; and with this, a new individualism arises. Similarly, spiritual bonds can play a major role where the biological or physical bonds are weakened; etc.'[10]

The definition of the Open Society as inevitably 'abstract', which offers social groups that are – still according to Popper – nothing but 'poor substitutes' incapable of providing a 'common life', is key. In itself, the 'abstraction' of human and social relations was not an original insight of Popper's – one thinks of Tönnies and Simmel of course – yet,

2 Alison and Peter Smithson, *Ordinariness and Light*, (MIT Press: Cambridge MA, 1970) p. 180.
3 See among others Alison and Peter Smithson, *Urban Structuring*, Studio Vista, 1967, London.
4 At this point it should be noted that in Communist Poland, Oskar Hansen developed his notion of 'Open Form'; more research is necessary here to understand the notion of 'open' and the cross-traffic between East and West during the Cold War era.
5 Karl Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, (Routledge & Kegan: London 1945) various re-editions; introduction, p. xxxvi.
6 Ibid., p. 147 and 153.
7 Ibid., p. 149.
8 The (anonymous) introduction to my edition of the *Open Society* (2002) calls it a largely 'social democratic' argument, which at first I found strange since I had situated Popper as a 'witness' to the culturally conservative critique on modernism (due to Colin Rowe's use of Popper's book against modernist town planning in his *Collage City*); it remains odd since Popper was brought to the London School of Economics by Friedrich von Hayek, and in our days of bank and Euro crises, Von Hayek is not quite considered to be on the left side.
9 Popper, 1945, pp. 166–167.
10 Ibid.

he connected it to an idea of twentieth century democracy and thus, he valued this abstraction as something with mostly positive effects and connotations. However, the universalist 'abstract society' on the one hand, and the 'real emotional social needs' that can only be satisfied by entering 'real' social groups on the other, put architects in quite a predicament, most certainly in relation to the question posed to architects to create cities full of meaning, identity and community.

Aldo van Eyck summarized it as a riddle impossible to solve when he rhetorically asked how architects could build the 'counterform' of society when society itself has no real form.[11]

Inclusiveness, Collectivism, and Public Space

Another key contradiction of Popper's proposition concerns, I believe, the combination of the all-inclusiveness and egalitarianism of the Open Society ('equalitarianism' Popper says), the exclusive role and responsibilities of the democratic state, and the anti-collectivist position as taken by Popper. Collectivism – that is any doctrine that puts the collective first and the individual second – will inevitably lead to totalitarianism according to Popper. Yet, in anticipation of a conclusion one might perhaps ask who else but the state (as the ultimate representative of the people) can actually guarantee any level of the desired all-inclusiveness and egalitarianism of the Open Society. Apparently, one just might have to accept that any variant of the Open Society needs to be built on some sort of collectivism (think of tax control, or even the rule of law some might argue), just as one has to accept that in the Open Society the abstraction of human relationships is inevitable. Naturally, this is not the place to ponder what sort of government system may balance these contradictory requirements in the best way possible, yet my question is what sort of spaces, typologies, and concepts were proposed and built by architects to meet these inherently contradicting demands of the Western European welfare state.

It is my hypothesis that the Team 10 position is the most vulnerable in this respect. Herman Hertzberger has argued that: "in architecture Team 10 and CIAM as well are the equivalent of socialism." He immediately tempered this: "I'm not saying literally. Maybe Giancarlo De Carlo is the only one who directly linked politics and architecture. Bakema certainly did not and Aldo van Eyck did it in a more philosophical way."[12] Whatever the exact political position, one might say that Team 10 represented one of the clearer moments at which architects claimed for architecture a capacity to accommodate the real social needs, while delivering an architecture that was open and all-inclusive in line with the post-war ideal of a democratic, egalitarian society. In the case of Team 10, the proposed concepts or typologies that would foster such an ideal were geared at the creation of 'in-between spaces' or 'spaces between', the doorstep most notably. Hence, within the design production of Team 10 we see all sorts of transition zones between the public and the private, which were intended to enhance collective behavior and the reciprocal creation of both individual and collective identities. Such in-between spaces were to enhance the encounters between the familiar home, the 'outside world' and 'other' spaces.[13]

A still fantastic example of this ideology is Van Eyck's proposal for the new town hall of Deventer, a design from 1966 that was not realized. The building internalizes the qualities of the medieval inner city and its dense fabric of small-scale alleys. The building itself becomes such a fabric, a micro-city of its own, with a public route brought into the built volume itself. The public domain and public life literally penetrate the interior of the political institute while upsetting the conventions of urbanism and architecture. Such a strategy is also the guiding principle of Hertzberger's design for the town halls of Valkenswaard (1966) and Amsterdam (1967), which are based on a grid of interior 'streets'. Hertzberger eventually realized this idea with the office building for the insurance company Centraal Beheer in Apeldoorn (1968–1972), the epitome of Dutch structuralism, and with his Vredenburg Music Center in Utrecht (1973–1978), in which the foyers blend with the public shopping arcades and the adjacent market square.

The typology of interior streets and 'streets-in-the-air' are the classic tropes of the post-war building production; they also hold a notorious reputation for the many social problems which are identified with it – vandalism, insecurity, feeling of insecurity and anonymity (rather than 'identity'), assault, burglary. We all know the examples, from the Bijlmermeer in Amsterdam, to Sheffield's Park Hill, from Robin Hood Gardens to Toulouse-le-Mirail, the Barbican to Thamesmead, and so forth. The vast access systems in these complexes were conceptualized as public streets, which made them prone to vandalism and worse. Apparently, when these projects were conceptualized the idea of such radical 'publicness' was not questioned. On the contrary, that everybody could enter them was a

11 Aldo van Eyck, 'The fake client and the great word "no"', in: *Forum*, August 1962, nr. 3, p. 79.

12 Clelia Tuscano, 'I am a product of Team 10', interview with Herman Hertzberger, in: Max Risselada, Dirk van den Heuvel (eds.), *Team 10 – In Search of a Utopia of the Present (1953–1984)*, (NAi Publishers: Rotterdam, 2005), pp. 332–333.

13 This position is not unlike the ones of Jane Jacobs, Jan Gehl, or William Whyte, of course.

matter of course: not just the milkman and postman, but simply every member of the new egalitarian society had a right-of-way in these public 'streets'. As the Smithsons aptly noted it was all about a new 'freedom to move'.

Spaces of Everyday Contestation

Behind the fate of these particular estates and the social problems involved lurks quite a bigger question impossible to fully address here, yet related to the kind of universalist, middle class kind of public space that designers and policy-makers seemed to have had in mind when building the welfare state. The open spaces provided to build a new community consensus all too often turned out to be used as spaces of everyday contestation of the status quo. How should an architect deal with both at the same time? The new personal freedoms of the Open Society also brought a new fragmentation that bypassed any sort of homogeneous body of democratic citizens. Planners and architects have to deal with mixed communities living together, who don't necessarily share a common idea of public space and public behavior; at times these notions of public space (who is allowed to appear in this space and on what terms, or costs) are actually contradictory to the kind of public space generally associated with the egalitarian public space of the Open Society. So, how open can the Open Society really be? How open can a city and its architecture be?

It is in Dutch Structuralism and its wider circle of post-war avant-garde that we find some of the most radical experiments, all under the banner of the welfare state and sanctioned by many enlightened officials who supported experiment and innovation as an alternative to Taylorist logic and Foucaultian biopolitics. Of course, such tendency was part of the welfare state system too, yet at heart the welfare state is a hybrid system, more or less anticipating the post-modern condition of negotiation, fragmentation and relativism as defined by Jean-François Lyotard.[14] In Holland such 'checks and balances' consisted of special money flows, industrial innovation programmes and regulatory and administrative exceptions, but also simply an appetite for the new that admittedly included a destructive element too, yet altogether resulted in the nowadays derided, generous tolerance of the 'permissive society' of the 1970s, including the embrace of multiculturalism, emancipation, and spiritual open-mindedness.

Perhaps Piet Blom's work embodies such ambiguity between consensus and contestation most radically, especially in his studies for an Urban Roof and the various Kasbah projects of the late 1960s, early 1970s. The houses are raised to 'free' the urban space and maximize the space for encounter and exchange. The resulting undercroft was meant as a Situationist *terrain vague*, an open landscape to be appropriated by the favorite of the post-war Dutch avant-garde: Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*. On a ground floor drawing of the Urban Roof project between the columns and access points to the raised houses, Blom inserted hand-written slogans and atmospheric references to the Provo interventions of those days: a mix of political statements, romantic insertions, but also of darker urban fantasies, religious ones, and new economic realities. The drawing reads like a mix of Cobra poetry and Situationist psycho-geographical mapping. The 'freed' urban space was made up of points and spheres of attraction, diversion or repulsion, not unlike Constant's dynamic labyrinth of New Babylon, or Frank van Klingeren's controversial and celebrated cultural centers. This interest in a new kind of polycentric yet continuous urban space was key for Blom to try and fulfill the promise of the welfare state by building the most radical kind of open space imagineable, but also terribly vulnerable to vandalism in all sorts of ways as we have learned. Herman Hertzberger's monument of the Dutch welfare state, the Ministry of Social Affairs building in the Hague (1979–1990), demonstrates perhaps the opposite. Not because its architecture lacks the necessary versatility, quite the contrary, but the technocratic demands of the program, and the care for security management especially, have led to a centralized, hierarchical order after all with one main entrance for surveillance purposes. It is probably here that we touch upon the underused potential of both the welfare state system and Dutch Structuralism.

14 In 1979 in his famous *La condition postmoderne* and in *Le postmoderne expliqué aux enfants* from 1986.