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# 'Delivering for the Fancy as Well as the Shabby' Amsterdam's Post-war Utopia of Urban Diversity



## Introduction

Over the last few years, Amsterdam's inner city has seen a rapid decrease in quality of life. Long-time residents and established retailers are increasingly giving way to the needs and demands of mass tourism. The advent of low-cost airliners, the rise of a global middle class and the uncontrollable spread of apartment sharing have put the affordability of central districts at risk, threatening the future of a socially and functionally mixed inner city. Most local residents respond with feelings of resignation, some of them even catering to the wishes of international visitors by renting out their flats using platforms such as Airbnb. Looking at these developments of gentrification and displacement, it seems as if Amsterdam has forgotten how its beloved inner city was once saved from similar threats.

Whereas today the forces of destruction stem from the growth in mass tourism, during the first post-war decades it was the rise of a post-industrial economy that wreaked havoc. City officials, planners and private developers considered the comprehensive redevelopment of central districts as the only solution to accommodate a growing number of cars, increasing amounts of office space and hotel venues. These plans would have amounted to the wholesale demolition of huge swaths of the built environment, if not for the residents who rose up against the urban renewal order in the latter half of the 1960s. Calling upon their local representatives to listen to the will of the people and employing innovative political strategies, urban action groups pleaded for affordable housing, cultural amenities and the human scale.

It takes little imagination to see the visions of action groups as urban utopias, accompanied by a specific set of architectural typologies and social motivations. Despite their different aims and objectives, developers and action groups were both searching and striving for the best possible mutual adjustment between the physical environment and society at large (Faludi & der Valk, 1994, p. 114). However, what sets the visions of action groups apart is their desire for radical change, engaging directly with contemporary spatial and social relations and seeking to expand senses of what is possible (Pinder, 2005, p. 7). Their visions embodied seductive promises of a better urban future, in which meaningful values, beliefs, codes and practices were attached to particular locations (Jerram, 2013, p. 404). Despite their connotation as imagined places, utopias are always grounded in the everyday reality of the societies in which they are envisioned and arise out of the limitations of contemporary conditions (Jameson, 2005, p. xiii). This also holds true for the Dutch post-war context, in which the lifestyle-oriented and subcultural utopia's of urban action groups came to the fore as a response to the plans of developers, which were merely responding to market demands and upholding society's status quo. This exemplifies how utopias are always produced in opposition to the system in power, used as an organising image to direct oppositional efforts towards replacing the established order (Eaton, 2002, p. 12; Coleman, 2005, p. 34).

Frontispiece Leidseplein in the 1970s.  
Unknown author.

To see what we can learn from the post-war utopias of urban action groups, this contribution takes discussions over the future of Amsterdam's Leidseplein as a case study. During the 1970s a private developer by the name of Nicolaas Bouwes and a group of activists known as Bouw-es-wat-Anders (BEWA) were engaged in a fierce battle over the question whether a former church building and prison complex was to be redeveloped into a fancy hotel, or repurposed as a multifunctional centre for public debate and the performing arts. By investigating the latter proposal as an urban utopia, this contribution sheds a new light on the aims and objectives of actors protesting against the post-war urban renewal order. The subtle suggestion is that we can only learn from yesteryears' utopias by examining the conditions in which they were born and given shape, or as Nathaniel Coleman (2005, p. 6) describes their learning potential for the here and now: '[Utopia] harbours the potential to rescue architecture from aimlessness, obsessive matter-of-factness, or a non-critical embrace of global capitalism.'

### **Utopia's radical incentives**

More often than not the term 'utopia' is employed by academics to describe the impossible, a situation which is not conceivable in the real world. As this contribution will demonstrate, this notion neglects the serious intentions and sincere engagement of the people envisioning a better world. Coleman (2005, pp. 34, 7) even excludes depictions of paradise and other 'wish-images' that are outside our possible grasp from his definition of utopia, as these do not serve to alter the present but to maintain the status quo. Utopia confronts urban conditions and problems by seeking to produce spaces suited to different ways of living, with its instigators stressing the feasibility and practicality of their ideas. Bearing this in mind, Ruth Eaton (2005, p. 12) provides an inclusive and adequate definition of utopia: '[A new urban design] intended to provoke and accommodate a society which is either as yet unconceived, in gestation or even in the pangs of birth, still rich with the dynamism and enthusiasm of the revolutionary momentum, young enough to be utopian.'

As this definition hints at, utopias usually come into existence under extraordinary circumstances and with the involvement of numerous actors. Rosemary Wakeman states that utopian urban projects tend to appear in times of great historical upheaval. According to Wakeman (2016, p. 4), post-war society certainly qualified, in particular the 1960s and 1970s: 'When things fall apart, utopian energies are released, so there was a tenor of plenitude, optimism and hopefulness during these years.' Eaton (2005, p. 16) agrees with Wakeman by explaining how utopias are often produced during times of social unrest. In line with this observation, Coleman (2005, p. 2) states utopian thinkers link desired changes in their personal lives with envisioned changes in the built environment, demonstrating how utopias are as much about the

transformation of the urban consciousness as the transformation of urban space. This suggests utopias are not designed at the hands of architects alone. In fact, most action groups of the post-war era only began contracting architects after their ideas had come to full fruition.

### **Making way for post-war affluence**

To understand the dialectics between urban society and utopia, this paragraph outlines key developments and actors in national and local fields of urban renewal. As observed by Wakeman, during the 1960s and 1970s Western cities and towns experienced rapid social and physical change. Prolific economic growth resulted in a rising number of cars and an increasing demand for centrally-located office space and retail venues. To accommodate the automobile age and the advent of a post-industrial economy, comprehensive redevelopment schemes were put in place. This was no different in the Netherlands. City officials and planners considered urban renewal as the only way to keep central areas viable and safe from congestion and decay (Verlaan, 2015, p. 542). Centrality was key here, or as a 1961 study on the functioning of Dutch inner cities concluded: 'Besides the architectural and aesthetics elements, being part of life and the ability to witness and experience dynamic change is what makes our city centres stand out from modern shopping centres' (Stichting voor Economisch Onderzoek der Universiteit van Amsterdam, 1961, p. 29).

As many other Dutch cities around this time, Amsterdam launched plans for demolition of the nineteenth-century areas surrounding the city's historic core, making way for multi-lane expressways, shopping centres and spacious office blocks. Despite their ever-growing ambitions, Amsterdam's city officials and planners were still dependent on the market to pour the forces of modernity into concrete. Enter the private developer. As one of the most powerful figures in the planning history of Western cities, this entrepreneur was able to transform material resources into new structures of social life (Berman, 2010, p. 63). It should come as no surprise the city was eager to kick-start its renewal programme by granting planning permissions to developers, who proposed several real-estate developments on the inner city's fringes. While buildings in the canal ring and medieval core were mostly listed, zoning laws were usually not in effect alongside the city's outer watercourse. In close consultation with both the alderman for spatial planning and the city's planning department, several informal public-private partnerships were setup to tap into the growing demand for centrally-located services and leisure facilities.

As the first redevelopment schemes got underway, powerful opposing forces came to the fore in Amsterdam. While the majority of its residents were exchanging their urban living environs for the suburbs, a younger generation of students and activists discovered the merits of inner city life, these being cheap rents, cultural amenities, and plenty of study and job opportunities (den Draak, 1971, 238).

During the 1960s, there was a clear tendency of young people moving into working-class areas such as the Jordaan, where 40 percent of the newcomers in the latter half of the decade was aged between 20 and 25 years old (Lesger, 2013, p. 360). The number of inner city dwellers in their twenties and thirties rose from 30 percent in 1964 to more than 50 percent in 1980 (Gemeentelijke Sociale Dienst, 1975, p. 9). As a Dutch anthropologist already noted in 1966 (De Haas, 1966, p. 47), there was a significant correlation between lifestyles and living preferences to observe here:

In some respects, our youth does not seem to be 'modern'. The *pays perdu* lingers on in the old, decaying neighbourhoods; in our condemned housing stock. We should give the youngsters the opportunity to continue their search for the *pays perdu*, at least until the moment they have to fully integrate and participate in society.

Local media outlets and professional journals quickly picked-up on the new phenomenon, usually writing in favour of the young adults protesting against the brave new world of urban modernism, which was dominated by business, finance and consumerism. As one commentator stated in 1972: 'Our youth brings back dynamism, diversity and contact with the anonymous but familiar urban crowd, reviving streetscapes that have been ruined by car traffic' (de Jong, 1972, pp. 13-22). Mocking the lifestyle of suburbanites, who supposedly spent their time gardening and watching television, social geographers (Bergh & Keers, 1981, p. 20) stated that the new city dwellers were always eating out and lavishly enjoying Amsterdam's cultural life. Even the city's promotional magazine (Mastenbroek, 1974, pp. 7-8), usually advocating urban renewal and economic expansion, was thrilled to see Amsterdam transform into a cultural playground for modern twentysomethings, who 'shook people awake and asked questions demanding personal answers'.

As the dictum goes, city air makes free. Due to the influx of young people Amsterdam's inner city was becoming a hotbed of political and social activism, especially as a substantial number of them was engaged in urban action groups or at least studying social sciences, which frequently dealt with community work and the built environment. Consequently, by the late 1960s action groups were competing with private developers over the question who owned the city. The ensuing debate lay bare two opposing visions on urban modernity: one in which the city was seen as an efficient, technologically advanced machine, another in which the city served as a safe space with room for social diversity and interaction (Feddes, 2012, pp. 294-297). According to Marshall Berman (2010, p. 313), whom I will quote at length here, developers presented their world as the only possible modern world: 'To oppose them and their works was to oppose modernity itself, to fight history and progress, to be a Luddite, an escapist, afraid other life

and adventure and change and growth.' The strength of action groups who rose up against urban renewal was that they presented themselves as being equally modern, or as Berman (2010, p. 314) describes their vision:

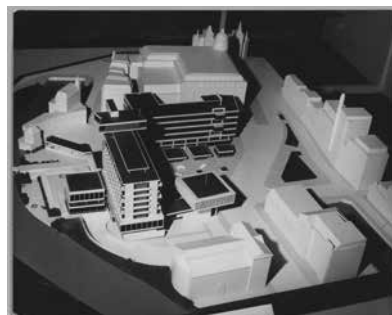
Before long they would find something more, a source of life and energy and affirmation that was just as modern as the expressway world, but radically opposed to the forms and motions of that world. They would find it in a place where very few of the modernists [...] would have dreamt of looking for it: in the everyday life of the street.

### **The battle over Leidseplein**

An important battle over the question who owned the city raged over the future of Amsterdam's Leidseplein, a square located in the southwest corner of the inner city surrounded by theatres, cinemas, hotels, restaurants and bars. Due to its central location and speculations about future infrastructure investments, during the 1960s the square's environs became an interesting investment option for local entrepreneurs and business-minded architects (Ploeger, 2004, p. 75; Weteringschans, 1977; Leidsebuurt, 1977). The most viable plan was presented in 1959 by Nicolaas Bouwes, a former exporter of Dutch cheese who owned several nightclubs and other entertainment facilities in Amsterdam (De dromen, 1976). Bouwes had traced an increasing demand for tourist facilities, after which he quickly arranged the designs and financial resources needed to kick-start a hotel development adjacent to the Leidseplein (Fig. 1). Eventually, the complex was planned to encompass 300 rooms, 138 luxurious apartments, 450-cars parking garage, theatre and shops, meshed together on 49.000 square metres of floor space grouped into identical 25-metre tall building blocks clad in reflective glass (Meijer, 1974).

During the 1960s city officials made several commitments to the plan and promised Bouwes to help him acquire planning permissions for the building plot. At that time the site was still occupied by a catholic church and an inward-looking prison complex, which were to be relocated to the city's outer boroughs. In 1965 the municipality bought the church building and started pressuring the national government to speed up the relocation of inmates, after which it could acquire the premises and rent the plot out to Bouwes (de Boer, 2005, p. 75).

As the mills of local and national governments were slowly grinding, a new actor laid claim to the soon-to-be vacated church. Sympathizers of Provo, an urban action group with subdivisions in most major Dutch cities, squatted the building in October 1967 to transform it into a 'cosmic recreation centre'. Soon enough the former church was renamed 'Paradiso', hosting drug-infested concerts and experimental cultural gatherings (Mutsaers, 1993, pp. 13-20). During the preceding years Provo had launched multiple plans to combat Amsterdam's housing shortage



**Fig. 1** Bouwes Leidseplein (preliminary 1965 plan, not executed).

and environmental issues, often with the intent to politicize urban issues and provoke city authorities into taking repressive measures (Mamadouh, 1992, pp. 11-18; Pas, 2003, p. 196; van Duijn, 1985, p. 177). Despite its local agenda Provo's founding members all hailed from outside of Amsterdam, demonstrating how the city was becoming a place of arrival for youngsters in search of a vibrant ambience and shared horizon of experience and desire (Bosscher, 2011; Berman, 2010, p. 33). Inspired by the Situationist International and urban utopias by Dutch artist Constant, Provo was out to radically transform urban society (Nieuwenhuys, 1964, p. 33; Sadler, 1998, pp. 91-103). No longer were their living environs to be dominated by money-making, automobiles and alienating buildings.

Irrespective of the rise of Provo and their squat of the church building, Bouwes proceeded with his hotel development. After numerous planning delays and preliminary designs, in 1975 the developer could present his final proposal. Contrary to his expectations, it was slashed by both city officials and the press for its gargantuan scale (Hoog-Catharijne in Amsterdam, 1975; Plan voor "gevaarte", 1975). In response to the Bouwes plan a new action group came to the fore, which shared many of Provo's ideals. For BEWA, a motley crew of preservationists, architects, artists, journalists and neighbourhood activists, it was not so much form but function that mattered (Bouw-es-wat-Anders, 1975). Moreover, Bouwes' plan was allegedly put forward without consulting any residents and was supposedly catering for one group of people only: wealthy tourists and foreign businessmen. Wanting to stir up discussion, BEWA pleaded for a democratic decision-making process mirroring the needs and wants of locals. Accusing Bouwes of sociocultural cleansing, BEWA cited a poem about Leidseplein's lively and mixed crowd:

It entails the artists and their aficionados, the voyeurs and their exhibitionists, the punks and their sociologists, the scroungers and their patrons, the silent drinkers and the loud-voiced junkies, the beautiful loonies, the crazy queers, the dead-serious homosexuals and cinephiles, the night owls and the daydreamers (Polak, 1965).

Whereas Bouwes and some city officials accused BEWA of backwardness, it should be emphasized here that its pleas for preserving a social mix were unheard of before the 1960s. By this decade, the pre-war utopias of great architectural thinkers, which had called for the annihilation of old cityscapes, had become common practice and even outdated in the eyes of some contemporaries. Furthermore, these visions of utopia were mainly serving business interests instead of the needy. This was reflected in how the media increasingly portrayed urban action groups as the new avant-garde (De bezem, 1970; De toekomst, 1977, p. 19). In BEWA's inviting utopia of inclusiveness and diversity, city life was coloured by irreconcilable differences, tensions

and contradictions, which were either swept away or neglected if Bouwes was given his way (Heynen, 1999, p. 13). Of course, this was not how BEWA's archenemy saw things. As most other developers, Bouwes combined his capitalist worldview with a much more romantic perspective on his tasks and achievements, in which he saw himself as a visionary benefitting the public good (Marriott, 1989, p. 2).

BEWA's alternate plan embraced the existing social and urban fabric and maintained both the church building and the prison complex, with the latter providing affordable starter homes, housing for the elderly, small-scale shopping venues, workplaces and a cultural centre. Not only the preservation of seemingly obsolete structures contradicted common practice, it was also BEWA's plea for a safeguarding of Leidseplein as the inner city's living room that created a revolutionary ardour (d'Ancona, 1975). When asked about the inner city's future, the action group's sounding board opted for more affordable housing and culture instead of business and tourist facilities. In the words of one newspaper, BEWA would deliver for 'the fancy as well as the shabby' (Een plein, 1977). In response a group of seven architects and an investor showed itself willing and able to bring ideas into practice. Their provisional sketches, which were supported by Aldo van Eyck and Herman Hertzberger, all shared the same departure point: Leidseplein had to remain a hub in 'an accessible and amenable city centre full of continuous movement, where people could be found strolling, swarming around and touching down' (Planburo Bouw-es-wat-Anders, 1976).

Although the national government was quick in listing the church building, forcing Bouwes to amend his plans, the future of the prison complex remained insecure. Despite calls by city officials to reach a compromise over this plot, Bouwes refused to take BEWA's plans seriously, as he thought consulting residents would only result in useless holler and clamour (Het Bouwes-project, 1975). Moreover, the mingling of his hotel's distinguished audience with Paradiso's crowd and the new social housing project was a taboo. The developer dreaded noise nuisance and a concentration of drug abusers, a fear which he based on late-night drives around the concert hall's premises (Mutsaers, 1993, p. 80). In Bouwes' vision, there was no room for subcultures and working classes in Amsterdam's inner city: 'Do we really have to provide social housing on such a prime location? I have no intention of being scornful, but then we will see people airing their laundry on Mondays!' (Als dit plan niet doorgaat is het een ramp, 1977).

As the debate raged on, city officials grew increasingly impatient with Bouwes. The social-democrats had always been in favour of real estate development for the sake of economic expansion and job growth, but found the developer's viewpoints of marginal groups 'intolerant and unsavoury' (Terugblik op het besluitvormingsproces, 1977). Chiming with BEWA's agenda, they stated the prison plot was in need of a new list of social wishes and demands (Voorstel raadslid Agsteribbe, 1977,



pp. 739-40; Voorstel raadslid Gruppen, 1977, p. 740). After a progressive alderman for spatial planning was installed, it was clear to Bouwes that his version of utopia was no longer feasible (Al jaren slepende zaak-Bouwes, 1979; Bouwes dreigt Amsterdam, 1979). In 1979 he threw in the towel, leaving the redevelopment of his beloved plot to BEWA and city officials, who had become more sensitive to criticism coming from urban action groups (ter Borg & Dijkink, 1992, p. 1). By the late-1970s, there was a clear deviation from trends in Amsterdam's real estate development, which suffered from an enduring economic crisis and an accompanying low demand for high-end office and hotel facilities.

The legacy of the battle between Bouwes and BEWA demonstrates just how short-lived this deviation was. While city officials were in search of social-minded developers to make the action group's plan work, in 1983 the national government decided Amsterdam should host a state-run casino. This decision signals how during the 1980s Dutch inner cities were gradually shifting from spaces of production to spaces of consumption (Zukin, 1995, pp. 109-151; Hannigan, 1998, pp. 51-56). Eager for investments, the city presented the Bouwes plot as a perfect location for the gambling hall, from which it stood to gain an indoor attraction for tourists, 300 new jobs and an alternative for illegal betting. The coming of the casino compensated for the preservation of the prison complex as well as the development of less-lucrative cultural functions and social housing (van Beek & Vierling, 1993, p. 12; ter Borg and G. Dijkink, 1992, p. 1). In 1993, after a long and tedious planning process, the so-called Max Euweplein opened to the public (Fig 2). With its affordable housing sitting next to a casino, its passage adorned by neoclassical ornaments and its mix of souvenir shops and offices, it was a strikingly postmodern development. Much to the chagrin of BEWA, financial shortcomings and political bargaining had compromised their utopia of inclusivity and diversity into a semi-public space mainly catering to suburbanites and tourists looking for a fun day out.



Fig. 2 Max Euweplein (final plan, opened in 1993).

### Conclusion

Looking at the watered-down version of BEWA's utopia today, labelled as an 'entertainment area' in official policy documents, one cannot help but feel sorry for the activists who had spent a lifetime protesting against Bouwes. Still, when compared with Bouwes' original plan, the current development is much more accessible and friendly to local residents. But maybe the struggle's physical outcome should not be our main concern here. The importance of BEWA for envisioning utopia today can be found in its action strategies and appeals to a just city. Its members gathered with the common purpose of expressing their discontent about urban issues in a public way, often quite literally so by organising street events and taking public surveys. Moreover, BEWA has demonstrated how policy makers do not necessarily have to abide to market forces and larger urban trends. By inviting a panoply of local residents to rethink Leidseplein's future and presenting the area as a

shared living room welcome to all, the action group appealed to both civitas and urbs, gaining widespread support from all layers of society.

Cities have always been viewed as sites of potential freedom. This is no different today, although as of yet the right to the city does not seem to be a uniting banner in Amsterdam. Yesteryears' proponents of urban utopias often accuse younger generations of political indifference and laziness, an accusation that neglects just how difficult it has become for young people to envision utopia in a city with ever-increasing costs of living. What both generations should take away from BEWA's utopian vision is that neither nostalgia nor nonchalance are useful in preserving and advancing what is still left of the socially and functionally mixed inner city. In line with the action group's strategies, residents should return a social dimension to architecture and develop new visions of utopia, if only to be used as a trade-off between the visions of developers and city officials. After all, most of Amsterdam's current residents owe their place in the sun to the ideals of the 1960s and 1970s.

#### Images

Frontispiece Retrieved 20 October 2016, from <https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/originals/a5/67/3e/a5673e5c6dd850d3c1df0822fc27597a.jpg>

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