THE CITY AS A BATTLEGROUND

AN INTERVIEW WITH
BART STUART
BY **ERICA MEIJERS**

Historically, cities have always been centres of economic activity. But as a result of globalisation, a fundamental change is occurring in the way money is earned inside cities. This is becoming ever more visible and tangible for city-dwellers. If cities are becoming amusement parks for tourists, a vehicle to earn money, what space is left for its citizens?

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DE STAD ALS STRIJDTONEEL

Erica Meijers interviewt Bart Stuart, kunstenaar in de publieke ruimte, over de strijd om de stad als bedrijf en pretpark of als plaats waar burgers samenleven.

A visual artist, Bart Stuart wishes to see 'human beings' become once again the focal point in the planning and development of cities. We meet in one of the trendy cafés on the grounds of the former NDSM dockyard, the Dutch Dock and Shipyard Company, where Stuart has a studio. From behind the large windows we have a view of the IJ, the artery connecting Amsterdam with the open sea. Once, the giant steel hulls of oil tankers were constructed in the docks. Now it's mainly pleasure yachts floating gently by.

ERICA MEIJERS: How would you define 'the city'?

BART STUART: Cites are battlegrounds where political views about the good life are being fought over on a rather small surface area. These competing visions go beyond the direct interests of the groups living and working in the city or those visiting it. And then there's the long term to consider. It's not only about what you can buy or consume now, but also about the issue of how to live together peacefully for a long time with many different groups of people. That issue is now being subjected to sustained scrutiny.

Why is that?

BART STUART: Behind it is a long process, which can be illustrated accurately in terms of the narrative of the former NDSM Dockyard, where we're sitting now. Here, too, there has been a development from labour to leisure. First there was the heavy shipping industry, providing jobs for thousands of people. Where the super tankers used to be built you now find luxury yachts. They are a final destination for people's leisure time. That's how the city's job is changing. From being a space for emancipation, the city now runs the risk of being turned into a space of segregation. In China, you still see many people migrating to the city to find a better future. In the city, historically, you started out as a worker, then moved upward through education. But today's urban economy hardly offers space for manual workers. In Europe even less so: from a manufacturing economy we have shifted to a services and sales economy, the consequences of which are becoming visible and tangible in urban environments in increasingly extreme ways. Take Amsterdam. It used to be a city of trade, with cacao, coffee, steel, and timber. Now the people themselves have been turned into merchandise: people living in the warehouses, renting out their accommodation to tourists; the old factories now housing cafés and restaurants; the ports are becoming festival grounds. Okay, we still have the largest petrol port; as a port Amsterdam fully thrives on oil, coal, and petrol, all highly polluting raw materials, with little future prospects.

How are these changes visible in the city?

BART STUART: In the first place, cities are simply becoming busier and busier: the growing hotel, restaurant, and catering industry, the tourists on their bikes-for-rent, and so on. But it runs deeper: life in the city as a battleground between conflicting interests in which you have to commit yourself is under pressure. In the 20th century, anarchist communes founded housing corporations in Amsterdam-North to ensure that workers had proper housing. It was a struggle you waged as a member of a collective. It took an effort. Today, the city is much more about convenience and entertainment, about consuming a menu that's been put together by someone else.

Here, we are looking out on an enormous and striking building under construction, the so-called Poortgebouw. In the old working-class neighbourhoods across the IJ [the body of water that runs through Amsterdam], they're now constructing housing for the super-rich. Here the most expensive apartment in Amsterdam is being built, sold for 15 million euros to a Chinese-Amsterdam resident – it caused quite a lot of indignation. But he has sold it on already, even if it's not even completed yet. It's not so much about living, it's not so much about building up a neighbourhood where people live together; it's purely doing magic tricks with as much money as possible. The building has been designed precisely to do

that: make money. The municipality pockets tax revenues and earns money selling land, but other than that neither the city nor the neighbourhood benefit; worse, the area is closed off for residents. Only foreign parties profit, because this is too big for local interests. This changes the concept of the city essentially. Money is no longer earned in the city, but on it. The way the apartment was sold shows this: the city itself has become a sales model. It's no longer a place where companies settle, the city has become a company itself.

You've seen that happening at the NDSM Dockyard. How did that go?

BART STUART: In 1985, it was the end of the line for the shipyard. All the dockworkers were made redundant. Then the shipyard changed from the pride of Amsterdam-North into its shame. For a long time the dockyard lay idle. In 1993, a good friend of mine, an artist, squatted in the slipway in which I still work and started using it as a studio. After a while he signed a contract with the administrator and started paying rent. I got involved a little later; with a group of artists we tried to revive the grounds. In 2000, the municipality started getting interested in the area; a competition was held for its redevelopment. Followed by policy schemes and big money. That's where things started going wrong in the first place: art became instrumental – a trailblazer for something else, namely earning money.

This process was set in motion by politics. It's good to know that the municipality owns all the land. By granting land, by leasing it, the municipality earns money. It's in its interest that land prices are as high as possible, because then land yields more money. That is a cynical economic model, often clashing with the interests of a neighbourhood. Two years ago all the artists here were told to move, the place was to be renovated and the accommodation was leased again at a much higher rent. Big companies moved in, run by foreign firms, with foreign real estate investors behind them. Not very nice neighbours, because you can't just call them up to help hang the paper chains when you're organising a neighbourhood party, while they're in the Bahamas. In this way the fraying edges of the city keep shifting and those living there are being pushed away by this corporate revenue model. Its basis is extraction: affairs belonging to the public sphere, those that were common property, are privatised and subjected to globalisation's large flows of capital. As a resident of this area you don't have a grip on that. A lot of money is made in a short period of time, which is subsequently not invested in the neighbourhood itself, but rather extracted from it.

You used to work in Chinese cities. Do you see the same thing happening there?

BART STUART: There are similarities, yes. I was in Shenzhen, a new town in the South of China,

specialised in microelectronics. In thirty years, what was a fishing village with a population of 30,000 has grown into a megacity with 30 million people. I happened to have dinner with the president of Merchants Group, a bank, and one of the richest project developers in China. First he showed me how important he is by mentioning that the turnover amounted to nine billion dollars annually. How did he earn all that money? Well, once he was given a lot of land by the Chinese state, including the harbour and the entertainment district. He built very expensive houses there, which earned him enormous sums. So a large part of the city is now his property, all because of a deal with the Communist Party. And that is happening all over China. What's more, the privatisation of cities is a global trend.

HOUSING IN INNER CITIES IS BECOMING MORE EXPENSIVE, WHILE POORER PEOPLE ARE FORCED OUT TO THE OUTSKIRTS, OR EVEN OUTSIDE OF TOWN

In Shenzhen you used to work with manual labourers. So there are people there with modest incomes. How do they live in a city like Shenzhen?

BART STUART: They are conscious of the hierarchy. They don't belong in the city and can't afford the housing there; they live on the outskirts and often have to travel to work three hours a day by underground, unpaid. You see that in a lot of Latin American cities, too: their centres are becoming centres of power and wealth and the people working there come from remote places in the surroundings. They spend more time travelling on the underground than working, so they remain poor. That is a very cynical development, which is happening here as well, but to a less serious extent. Here, too, housing in inner cities is becoming more expensive, while poorer people are forced out to the outskirts, or even outside of town. Here, too, hotels are cleaned by staff who are not affiliated to a trade union, making 4 euros an hour.

This raises the question of who owns the city? Who has the power to answer this question?

BART STUART: In Amsterdam, too, it is being admitted that money is the planner. All those cheese shops and ice cream parlours aren't there because we love cheese or ice cream so much; behind them are large financial structures changing the city into an amusement park for temporary sojourners. And those are not troublesome visitors, but consumers who want to be gratified with sex or weed or cheese or Nutella and ice cream, and once their wishes have been fulfilled, they return home again. But it is a very cynical notion of what human beings need in life [laughs]. The citizens, for one thing, don't benefit.

PROFITS ARE CHANNELLED ABROAD, WHILE THE NEIGH-BOURHOODS AND THE CITY FOOT THE BILL IN THE FORM OF A LOT OF NUISANCE AND RUBBISH

Where does politics come into this story, both worldwide and locally?

BART STUART: Well, that's hard. Politics should both question and fight the takeover of the city by multinational companies, instead of going along with the concept of the city as a company. Green Parties can play a meaningful role, because energy and food will be on the agenda in the years to come. But they should address the large financial structures instead of aiming at nice green projects like city gardening and carbon neutral cafés.

And you will need local government and Europe as well, because as a city on your own you can't beat those big companies. I see the current debate about urban autonomy as a rearguard action: how as a city do you think you can take on the 25,000 letterbox companies who came here because the city is a tax haven? I don't think you stand a chance against the lawyers of companies like Gazprom and the Rolling Stones, because we don't even have enough lawyers to tackle the dog shit! The whole idea that the creative class has to contribute to the city's competitive position is part of the notion of the city as a company, and what good is that to local citizens?

Green parties need to be critical. Airbnb is turning our homes into hotels with the use of algorithms. A Taiwanese bike rental company is filling the whole city with yellow bikes you can rent with an app, use for an hour or two and then leave anywhere. They are pushing away citizens' bikes and creating chaos. In Beijing I have seen those bikes being piled up in very big heaps. It's called the sharing economy and it sounds nice, but in fact it's fast food economics: houses, bicycles, taxis, everything is turned into fast food. This can only work if revenues provide excess value to the neighbourhood and the city. But profits are channelled abroad, while the neighbourhoods and the city foot the bill in the form of a lot of nuisance and rubbish. That's why I for one believe in strong government, because you need to regulate.

Which obstacles do you see for politics to reconquering the city for its citizens?

BART STUART: First of course there's the political outlook of the parties themselves: they need to recognise that the city is a place to live together and not some money-making vehicle. But a politics in which someone is judged on their short term results by the electorate determines policy-making, and fosters the fast food mentality.

Then there is the issue of political representation: parties have fewer and fewer members and there is less and less commitment. We must contemplate new forms of citizens' political commitment, and not only in a digital direction. People without a computer are increasingly excluded from participation, from having a say. Maybe we should vote on issues rather than parties once every four years.

Don't forget bureaucracy as a third obstacle. Amsterdam has 13,000 officials trying to steer urban planning. A colossus like that develops a logic of its own, aimed particularly at preserving itself. It seems as though politics limits itself more and more to checking if procedures have been completed properly, rather than enquiring about people's well-being. Thus, in the city centre many council houses have been sold in the last few years, which has dramatically hampered diversity. Then you hear: well, it's sad that those people have had to leave town, but procedures were run properly.

In short: public interest is no longer at the table, it's only about money and procedures.

What you're saying sounds rather gloomy.

BART STUART: Still I have hope that things can be done differently. These are tendencies, which can be reversed. But then we have to conduct the debate about the city in a different way. It's no longer enough to sit together in debating centres as like-minded Green and progressive people. You have to talk to people who are really affected by these developments. They are the ones who are not represented in politics. In that respect there are direct parallels between China and Amsterdam-North: problems are being discussed at a high level of abstraction and urban planners see the reality through the drawing-board. So the people who are having a hard time, or those who have been forced out because of your plans, you never get to see in real life and so you don't have to look them in the eye.

In Green Parties and Green programmes, problems are often solved by technology, for instance by the idea of 'smart cities'. But that amounts to giving away responsibility to larger systems that collect information about us and of us, and get rich by taking away money from the public domain. Smart cities don't invest trust between and in people. And that's what it's all about. It's about love. About a sense that the earth was here first and then we

came, and that the earth will go on without us; it's about commitment and love for the greater whole. What good are algorithms in times of crisis? Then we only have each other.

How do you do that, invest in each other?

BART STUART: Over and against the concept of the city as a company, I would like to put forward the concept of the city as a 'do-space'. People will have to take centre stage again. European inner cities have to change from passive consumer spaces into active 'do-areas'. This means that public space in big cities must be employed to develop workshops (not festivals!) collectively, in which people 'practise' active citizenship. All kinds of things can be discussed there and put on the agenda and at the same time a strategy for change can be developed, as an antidote to the privatisation of public space. It appears that in all the big cities of Europe and the US, a large majority of young city-dwellers are all in favour of Europe, in favour of democracy and a just distribution of wealth. We have to seriously start working with them. It's always a battle to shape a city, and it's something I like doing, too. Because cities aren't about comfort, relaxing with a cup of herbal tea in a café with sustainable windows. Resistance against neoliberal urban planning must come from the cities themselves.

BART STUART
is a visual artist who lives and works in Amsterdam as well as in the Chinese city of Shenzhen. He teaches at the Bildung Academy of the University of Amsterdam and at colleges of technology in Germany. For more information about Bart Stuart's work, go to: www.bartklaar.nl

ERICA MEIJERS
is a journalist and a theologian. She works at the Protestant Theological University in Groningen, the Netherlands. Until 2017 she was a member of the editorial board of the *Green European Journal* and editor-in-chief of *de Helling*, review of the political foundation of the Dutch Greens. In 2016 she published with Nuala Ahern the book *Green Values, Religion and Secularism*, edited in cooperation with the Green European Foundation.