

A clear vision for footing

Good public space becomes more and more important in our cities. The more choices there are on where people want to live, the more important the quality of their surroundings is. People usually prefer to spend their lives in places that are green, clean and safe. But the task to realize a good public space has become quite difficult. Too many people are involved; too many guidelines have to be followed. In this article I want to look at what makes a good public space and how to achieve it.

What makes a good public space? And what is for instance needed to realize a good park? Undoubtedly, numerous designers and their clients have often asked themselves these questions. As a project manager I have been involved in the realization of several parks in Amsterdam during the past ten years. The largest project so far was the Culture Park Westergasfabriek that was opened in September 2003. The Dutch Ministry of the Environment awarded me with the Golden Pyramid, the prize for best manager in a public space project.

In this article I want to address the different aspect that make a good park. As I was involved in the entire process of building Culture Park Westergasfabriek, from formulating the Project Requirements to paying the bill for the last tree planted, I have learned many lessons in that project. One of the lessons is that a lucid outline and a clear vision of the function and layout of a park are of vital importance.

But I have also been involved in several other projects that have interesting aspects on building new public space. I am now working with Holland's most renowned landscape architect Adriaan Geuze on a new park in Amsterdam North, the Noorderpark. But because of this I also have been involved in different other projects like the Noordpark in Antwerp, the Hiraja Park in Tel Aviv and different parks in the Emscher region in .

Creative approaches to increasing urban density

With the departure of heavy industry cities have once again become attractive as a place to live and visit. Since a number of years cities have been making substantial investments in urban public space. However, as urban space is limited, the need to increase building density has become overwhelming. Not surprisingly, dual use of space has become a common phenomenon. At the same time many cities are turning former industrial zones into city parks. Some parks may serve to hide large-scale infrastructure from view.

By now there are numerous European examples. Paris beats them all: Parc de Bercy, Parc André Citroën and Parc de la Vilette are all examples attesting to great ambition. Barcelona is notable for its Parc del Clot, Parc de Diagonal Mar and many other parks. The German state of Nordrhein-Westfalen established an ambitious programme in the nineteen nineties, which included the conversion of the northern Ruhr Area into the Emscherpark. This metropolitan region includes various spectacular parks, the most remarkable of which is the Landschaftspark Duisburg-Nord. In numerous other cities in former industrial regions (such as Naples, Seattle, Antwerp and London) similar developments are taking place.

The modern task of realizing a park is almost always connected with resolving large-scale spatial and infrastructure problems. Without exception the realization of a successful park is therefore a complicated process. In this process the primary objective, i.e. to create a high quality public green space where people can meet one another in multiple ways, is frequently put on the back burner: quality and use of the park are likely to become side issues. Once the infrastructure process has been completed and spatial structures have been adapted, it frequently happens that only few means are left to realize the park itself.

A vision for footing

In order to succeed in realizing an attractive park despite the complexity of the task, it is of vital importance that this process is based on a vision that strongly appeals to one's

imagination; a vision that guides the process. First and foremost, this vision should be about people and appeal to large groups of them. This will ensure public support for the project. Second, it should be based on a captivating park design concept. This will be vital for the communication with the people living in the neighbourhood who are often inconvenienced for several years, and for the communication with potential sponsors, as fundraising is often necessary throughout the entire process in order to complete the project. It enables the contracting authority to show the sponsors what their money is spent on.

The complex process of planning and realizing a park takes place along many, often divergent, lines. A vision can ensure that the project does not derail when there are differences of opinion, conflicting interests or setbacks.

How does a vision come about? The new, scintillating Culture Park Westergasfabriek is located in what used to be an isolated industrial park on the outskirts of the inner city. For sixteen buildings listed as national industrial monuments a new use had to be found. The concept of the Westergasfabriek project arose from the original function of the industrial park. The Dutch word 'gas' is derived from the Greek 'chaos'. 'Turning chaos into light' was the purpose of the Westergasfabriek (gas plant) for nearly a hundred years. A symbol of activity, renewal and change, 'light' played an important role in the vision for the Westergasfabriek. For good reason, the landscape architect entitled her design '*change ment*'.

Working on the other park in Amsterdam, the Noorderpark, we needed a vision as well. The Noorderpark is the amalgamation of two separate parks in Amsterdam North the Florapark and Volewijkspark. The borough of Amsterdam-North is a patchwork of various neighbourhoods. It is separated from the rest of Amsterdam by the water of the IJ. Moreover, the district is bisected by a canal, the Noordhollandsch Kanaal, dug in 1824 on the authority of the Dutch King Willem I. In the nineteen sixties this dividing line was reinforced by the construction of the Nieuwe Leeuwarderweg, the motorway connecting the Amsterdam city centre with the northern part of the province of North Holland. Today, the construction of the North South metro line, which will be running from Amsterdam-North via Dam square to Schiphol Airport, creates all kinds of new possibilities, for example to lower and cover the motorway. This in turn offers the unique opportunity to unite the two present parks into one new Noorderpark.

The vision for the Noorderpark stems from the concept chosen by its landscape architect, Adriaan Geuze of West 8: meeting. The Noorderpark is located in the heart of the borough and is a junction between major bicycle and pedestrian routes. The most significant feature of the park design is a circuit that not only connects the three separate parts of the park but also provides the people of Amsterdam-North with an important meeting place. This is why the circle that connects all there is in this park became the basis for vision for the park.

The relationship between contracting authority and landscape architect

The contracting authority is responsible for guiding the process and solving any problems that may occur. The client defines the framework and has the final responsibility, whereas the project manager is responsible for the day-to-day management and also serves as a contact person.

Of vital importance for a successful project is an unambiguous and concise formulation of the Project Requirements. In contrast to popular belief, the Project Requirements is not a simple list of everything that a park may or should offer. It is very important that many choices already have been made. A model park is attractive during all the seasons, seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day. This implies that a park should have various types of spaces: spaces that are beautiful, but above all spaces that offer flexible user possibilities. The art of a good Project Requirements, then, is to set priorities within the range of large and small wishes that users may have. Therefore the Project Requirements is an extremely important document, written in close consultation with representatives of all intended park users.

The landscape architect should take into account the various interests described in the Project Requirements. The vision for the park should clearly emerge from the park design. The most important requirements for realizing an attractive park may well be a good relationship between the contracting authority and the landscape architect, as well as their agreement on the basic principles.

A park for everyone

Most importantly, a city park should be a place where people can meet one another. This is a vital interest in the new creative era. In addition, it should be a place that stimulates the senses. Contact with nature is after all an essential need of many people. Unexpected vistas, the sound of running water or grit softly crunching under your feet: they may all contribute.

A park is *not* a private garden. Too many public spaces are being claimed by one specific group. But a park is meant for everyone. This does not mean that a park should always be right for everyone simultaneously. The key is to create a rich diversity of green, multifunctional spaces. For example, the grass in the park should allow for soccer playing, an almost daily activity in parks such as the Vondelpark and the Museum Square both also in Amsterdam. The Museum Square is the new park that was created between the Rijksmuseum the Van Gogh museum and the Concertgebouw, in other words the most important cultural temples in Amsterdam. However, as the lawn in the Museum Square was not designed for soccer, it rapidly turned into a mud bath. An obvious solution is to lay at least one of the lawns in the park with high quality, soccer-proof turf. Furthermore, a park should be suitable for dog owners, often the most loyal visitors of the park. However, dogs do not need the whole park as dog toilet or leash-free zone. Finally, in Holland of all places, there are the cyclists who use the park only in the sense that they cross it on their way elsewhere. They do not need the whole park to always be able to take the shortest route possible.

A park is intended for all sections of the population. It should accommodate families to have a picnic, children to celebrate their birthday parties, senior citizens to sit down on a bench to catch their breath and enjoy the flowers, and lovers to find some privacy. As everyone is able to use the park in his or her own way, social cohesion is brought about.

Striving for social cohesion

An obvious question is who is responsible for this social cohesion. The 'spiritual owners' of the park are its regular users, that is, the people living in the adjacent neighbourhoods. Their user habits will determine how the park develops over time. Users should have the feeling that the park is theirs, without claiming it. This is only possible when they are truly proud of their park. To achieve this, a carefully thought-out park design that is implemented properly and allows for adequate maintenance is essential. Many designers tend to overlook this fact sometimes. In their eyes, the user may become a 'perfect' user, or - worse still - an 'average' user. A good design should anticipate the most common conflicts, so these may be avoided.

The actual owner of the park, usually the local authority, should be able to properly maintain the park. How many public spaces, once beautifully fitted out, haven't been ruined, after several years, by intensive use? Expensive flagstone suffers from frost damage or big cars driving on it, ponds become so dirty that no child will play in it, grass stops growing as it is ruined by soccer playing, fountains quit working, lampposts fall over or break down, and tree roots crumble the pavement. Recognizing these problems my clients in Amsterdam reserved a target sum for maintenance and management of the Culture Park Westergasfabriek, prior to the park design process. The landscape architect Kathryn Gustafson was informed of this sum, and was asked to demonstrate that her design would allow proper park maintenance without exceeding the maintenance budget. A similar approach has been taken for the Noorderpark.

While demand for green space is growing, public space is increasingly privatised. Parks are in danger of becoming a concatenation of privatised public spaces such as golf courses,

tennis courts, swimming pools and marinas. Sometimes this even results in 'a green version of gated communities' with each part of the park being closed off by its own gate. In those cases the discussion on the most desirable park layout will reflect the battleground of modern times, where individualization and worries about personal safety are predominating. We are presented with the familiar choice: do we prefer a public space open to everyone, for meeting, exchange and social cohesion? Or would we rather move towards a city consisting of separate, gated enclaves, where we feel safe only when a guard is posting at the gates?

The Noordpark in Antwerp

The Noordpark in Antwerp is a very interesting example of a new public space because it reflects in many ways the choices that have been made in the projects described elsewhere. In the Noordpark an old railway compound is used to build a new park in the hearth of one of the most complex areas near the centre of Antwerp. The project team has chosen to be informed by many others before they started. They wanted to avoid making the mistakes that are made elsewhere. They wanted to be connected in an international setting before they started their complex work. A serious and compact Project Requirements has been made. After that a competition with five landscape architects was held. The best plan won, made by architects Bernardo Secchi and Paola Vigano from Milan. The vision for the park is light and space. Three of the beautiful characteristic and monumental buildings edging the park will be saved. More than a thousand new trees will be planted. But much more than that these forgotten and overseen neighbourhoods will have their own high quality public space, a park that certainly will attract travellers from abroad.

Public space in Amsterdam

Realizing functional, attractive public space is a difficult task, as a number of recent examples in Amsterdam have shown. When Philips Electronics moved from Eindhoven to Amsterdam because the latter would be 'the place where the action is' and offer more prestige and character, they chose to locate their offices at the Omval, near the Amstel Station on the river Amstel. Seldom has a location with so much potential been turned into a more lacklustre project. Except for an occasional cyclist flashing by or train traveller rushing past, there is no one out on the street. The place has no public function whatsoever and nothing is going on.

A few miles to the south near Amsterdam Southeast is the Amsterdam ArenA where the football stadium of AJAX is situated. As 'an imposing metropolitan boulevard', the ArenA Boulevard was meant to connect the successful business centre of Amsterdam-Southeast with the impoverished district of Bijlmermeer. However, for fear of the soccer fans that visit the ArenA at least once every two weeks, everything on or near the boulevard is of almost military durability. Not a single building along the boulevard relates to its environment and the black pavement is dotted with thousands of pieces of chewing gum.

In the hearth of the city of Amsterdam one can find the Museum Square. This public space has the potential to be the cultural heart of the Netherlands. Since the last few years it has been the location of the Uitmarkt (a fair at which all of the cultural attractions for the coming year are advertised) and the finishing point for every major protest march. In addition, the Square houses the four perhaps most important cultural institutions of the country: the Concertgebouw, the Rijksmuseum, the Stedelijk Museum and the Van Gogh Museum. More so than the Dam Square, the Museum Square is a place where thousands of tourists could mingle with Amsterdam citizens. A unique opportunity, one would say. However, in spite of all efforts the Square has not moved beyond being the rear side of its buildings, many of which are turned with their backs towards the square.

The Dam square, the place that really could be the hearth of the city is not even worth to be mentioned. The Royal Palace, that once was called the seventh world wonder by Goethe, is closed more than 350 days per year. There is no building that offers any relationship with the square except for the waiting lines for the Madame Tussauds wax museum and the entrances of a shopping mall. The square has recently been repaved with a beautiful

Portuguese hard stone. This has been done so poorly that there is hardly a possibility to cross the square on foot.

Back to the Noorderpark

The park that is under construction today, the Noorderpark has every potential to become a successful park. Its design is lucid and clear. The heart of the park is formed by a large open space with clusters of trees. This space covers part of the former existing. Surrounding the open space the circuit or 'loop' connects the various parts of the park; it symbolizes the reunion of the fragmented parts of Amsterdam-North. From all sides of the park, visitors can enter the circuit, walk it, and meet one another there.

A vision based on 'meeting' invites everyone with an opinion to participate in the design process and project. There are risks involved in this. If so much talking and research is needed, if so many demands and wishes must be agreed to, how much then will be left of the original concept? Clear decision-making by the local authority responsible, i.e. the borough council will help to avoid many of these problems.

A project team deals with all questions and problems arising, and contributes potential solutions. Whenever possible, they consult with all parties concerned. Inhabitants of the borough of Amsterdam-North are closely involved in the project. Developments in the design process are regularly discussed in a feedback group. Specific target groups are contacted separately, trying to meet their wishes whenever possible, if need be through the dual use (or even threefold use) of park space. During these discussions it is essential, however, that the project team and the landscape architect firmly adhere to the basic ideas of the design. This way they can ensure that the design – and therefore the future park – remains a meaningful whole and does not become a hotchpotch of personal wishes and special interests.

The quality of the process will determine the quality of the final product. Constructive collaboration is therefore essential and only possible when everyone involved is firmly committed to the project. The project should not become a political plaything. It should be based as broadly as possible. It is a misconception that such an approach would only yield compromises. Friction polishes, in other words: a good landscape architect with a strong design is able to meet all complex and sometimes conflicting demands presented. And a competent project team is able to find new solutions time and again without affecting the essence of the design. The park offers ample possibility for flexible development and growth.

At least as important as the destination is the journey to get there. The future has started today. Therefore, the products we deliver now should emanate the high quality of the final product we wish to realize in the coming years.

Only in this way it is possible to realise public spaces that can be the pride for everyone.