

Designing with Vacancy

RONALD AND ERIK RIETVELD INTERVIEWED BY ARJEN OOSTERMAN

We met Ronald Rietveld and his brother Erik at their Rietveld Landscape studio in Amsterdam. It's not easy to find their office, tucked away as it is in a courtyard within walking distance from Central Station. Ronald, clad in the inevitable black, welcomed us warmly, to be joined by his brother Erik. The studio, with a couple of team members, betrays little of what is actually designed there: the occasional model in a corner, a large table with workstations, some shelving – and little else. Architecture practices are rarely situated in high visibility locations, and display to the outside world little of what they do. Clearly the same applies for landscape architects.



Two years ago Ronald, Erik, and their studio collaborated on the Dutch contribution to the 2010 Venice Architecture Biennial. There, they presented an almost never-ending accumulation of empty public buildings in the Netherlands; the show was called 'Vacant NL'. This plethora of blue styrofoam models powerfully spotlighted the problem of vacant real estate and the challenge to the design community. The concomitant 'Dutch Atlas of Vacancy' shed light on the nature of the various buildings and, in particular, their scope for conversion and redevelopment; an atlas of potential, rather than one of problems.

Subsequently the Sandberg Institute invited him to set up an experimental Master's course focusing on that theme for the Interior Design department. What might that entail? Has landscape architecture meanwhile taken on board the interior, having already 'taken over' the city during the past twenty years?

ARJEN OOSTERMAN To get straight to the point: what's a landscape architect doing at an art academy?

RONALD RIETVELD Firstly, I'm not on my own. I run this studio with my brother, Erik, who's an economist and a philosopher. And though I'm originally a landscape architect, I'm not sure these days exactly what I am. It is an important backdrop to the work. Our method determines what we do: that applies to how we dealt with the architecture biennial, how we run the department at the Sandberg Institute, how we work here, and how we tackle everything.

AO Can you explain?

RR We have assignments that are related to socially relevant topics. That was also the motivation for Venice. We were asked to present a socially relevant theme and make an 'in-your-face' exhibit. It was intended to be a total installation. But nothing else was specified – so it was a do-as-you-please assignment. One thing that has fascinated me for a long time is vacancy, especially of public buildings. Not vacancy as such, but what you could do with it. The current discussion about 'empty square meters', particularly office buildings, is excessively boring. It's limited to the reductive jargon of architects to simply 'fill up' the program in square meters. But tens of

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thousands of public buildings are involved; mostly inspiring cultural heritage. At the same time, the Netherlands wants to be one of the top five knowledge-based economies in the world; a part of this includes the creative industry. The dormant economic potential of the vacant legacy is tremendous. Especially when you bear in mind that many of those buildings are in the middle of a city. A great many empty offices are in the middle of nowhere, not on the outskirts, but not in the city either. However, a hospital or a water tower is in the city. But a bunker on the other hand is isolated somewhere where pretty much anything goes (for instance where you can make a lot of noise). So those excellent possibilities for the reuse of public buildings formed an important starting point. The exhibition was not so much about re-using vacancy, but about the possibilities of the interim. That's a different

matter. In the 'Dutch Atlas of Vacancy' we represented those 10,000 public and government buildings and their potential uses for the interim period. That aspect is completely ignored in the discussions on vacant real estate. We recently had a meeting with all the architecture education establishments in the Netherlands, initiated by the Redevelopment team. Although there was a focus on the redevelopment aspect, people just didn't know how to handle this problem. It's not strange that lots of architects have difficulties with it. Traditionally there's a program that needs a building and now it's the other way around: there are buildings looking for a program – this requires a different attitude.

What characterizes our studio is our tendency to address assignments in a wider context, to zoom out and make associations. That applies both to the implicit political agenda, as well as to the study of the spatial phenomenon of vacancy. At the same time, you zoom in on the lowest planning level: the scope and context of the building itself. So that's very local, but we tie it in with a national ambition.

Regardless of whether it's interior or exterior... it's an operation for the public domain. We analyzed the premises with respect to particular possibilities: for instance, if it's possible to light a fire there, but also what knowledge networks are available in the building. In addition, there are also buildings where 140 decibels are permitted, as in the former air force base at Soesterberg [see text box on the following page].

ERIK RIETVELD You might like to hear that the Soesterberg project came about as a request from the client to convert one shelter for movie viewings and researchers. So an interior job!

RR We indicated how various initiatives might find a place on the enormous site. That's how it all came about. Meanwhile there's a plan that might well materialize. So when you ask what a landscape architect is doing at an art academy, my answer is that an architect or an interior designer might have just embarked on the interior job, while the landscape architect can't help looking further at what's going on and what unique opportunities there are – then a 60-meter wide and 3-kilometer long runway is a fantastic feature.

AO I've noticed for quite some time that interior programs have been broadening their field, also 'taking on' public space.

RR The new head of the Interior department, Anne Holtrop, promptly renamed it: Immediate Spaces. Clearly the name 'Interior' is not very popular. Also, he's involving people who link up the various 'scales', like John Lonsdale and Bas Princen.

ER I can understand that – it's the same in our studio.. We regularly wonder if we should continue to use the word 'Landscape'. But by now, the term 'Landscape' behind 'Rietveld' acquired a broader meaning. It's now about zooming in and out from a broader vision; designing with a focus on context rather than object. But those who aren't familiar with our work might pigeonhole us too quickly as a landscape office. Interior designers will have the same feeling, when they have the ambition to go 'outdoors' as well.

AO Evidently disciplines are being mixed more and more, in the sciences too. Exciting things take place exactly at that 'overlap', in the intervening areas.

RR But we still have to know how people should be trained, what they should be allowed to master. To have only generalists isn't the solution.

AO What's your intention with Vacant NL?

RR The students who enroll with us already have some background and are from various disciplines. So from the start, it's a multidisciplinary team.

ER There are architects, people from the Design Academy, a graphic designer, interaction designers, a political scientist...

AO Your selection is based on that diversity?

ER Yes, with this subject it's very important. We would've liked to also have a fireman in the group, because fire safety is a huge issue with assignments of this type.

RR Everyone was already a specialist in a certain field before embarking on this Master's program.

ER I wouldn't be in favor of educating specialists at the bachelor level with a focus on temporary use.

RR If you did, you might get people who know nothing or a bit of a whole lot of things.

AO What do you actually add to what they already know?

RR They all evolve in their own directions, in keeping with their backgrounds. One is more focused on 'making', another on the process. I believe they will all find a job, based on the projects they're currently working on.

What the political scientist does would be impossible for the person specializing in creating a relocatable interior and building on site. And vice versa.

AO But what do you teach them that they didn't already know?

ER To think from a much bigger, national ambition; this opens doors for them that otherwise would've stayed shut. And how a contribution can be made to public space; to deliberately make that part of redevelopment. How temporary use can give something back to the neighborhood or to the city as a whole.

RR That's been a forgotten element in recent years – the indoor/outdoor transition. But of course there's a list of learning goals.

AO Let me put it differently: you said earlier that the assignment itself is barely acknowledged by the specific disciplines. But does the assignment have something special? Does it entail special demands?

ER The active engagement in interesting spatial programming which considers the specific qualities and context of a building, there's a lot to be gained there in the coming years. And there's the legal side; the possibility of making a spot with live/work spaces in a space designated only for work use, for example. Like with Vacant Appsterdam, where we blurred the line between living, working and recreation.

RR Yes, so far live/work spaces hardly took off. We've got a law firm that figures out those aspects for us; to find legal loopholes and facilitate things cleverly. So aspects like that are also addressed in the course.

But the goals are: excellent, design-focused research; acquisition of knowledge about the existing practice of temporary redevelopment; familiarization with multidisciplinary work with a view to tackling design assignments; approaching the design discipline from a social context; finding reproducible solutions and testing them in practice – we don't want to be an abstract debate club, but really test things. Another aspect is how to present what you want to say well. For lots of people, that's disastrous, and it's so important. Also, international applicability is one of the basic learning goals.

ER The program includes visits to work sites – call

The former air force base at Soesterberg, a 20-hectare area in the middle of the Netherlands, is awaiting redevelopment. There are plans to partially 'return' the area to nature, demolishing the 4-kilometer runway and designating the surrounding buildings for differing uses. Initially Rietveld Landscape was asked to repurpose a F15 shelter for movie viewings. They considered this a missed opportunity for such a unique area and instead proposed an innovation program, in collaboration with researchers from the department of Aviation & Aerospace of Delft University of Technology. It uses the unique presence of the runway to create a test and research environment for new, eco-friendly forms of aviation, thus activating the area as a new experimental space for an economically key sector.

In the framework of Appsterdam – an initiative of former Apple software developer Mike Lee to turn Amsterdam into a center for the international apps industry – Rietveld Landscape worked on accommodation for the creative minds that were brought into Amsterdam for workshops, hackathons, and other cross-fertilizing events. The ambition is to attract 1,000 to 2,000 young app makers to the city. As a pilot, part of the Westergasfabriek that would be vacant for five months was used to accommodate these app makers. Interestingly, these young creative people, with few ties, proved willing to move around from one place to another, and accept the temporariness as a living condition. The decisive factor was not a luxury interior, but the location. That implied entirely different deployment and engagement with the existing building stock than would be desirable and feasible in traditional views on redevelopment. With minimal adjustments and amenities these buildings proved suitable for a new kind of industry.



Vacant NL at the 2010 Venice Architecture Biennale



Vacant Appsterdam

them apprenticeships – for the acquisition of certain skills. One girl, herself a mountaineer, recently visited a company that paints oil rigs, in order to apply that technique in large public vestibules.

RR Seen from my own background as a landscape architect, I think it's very important to know, when you make an intervention at the lowest planning level, what its effects will be at other levels. That's what we at the studio call 'strategic interventions': precisely chosen and carefully designed interventions that bring about desired developments. Strategy combined with design quality.

AO **And when you look at the available programs – for urban designers, architects, landscape architects, interior designers – who's best equipped to fill the posts in the Vacant NL field?**

RR It's very hard to say. Those who are teaching the generation that will have to set about this assignment themselves date from the good times when everything was possible and feasible. I'm not too confident. Education for export – for China – is of course an option, but these issues are going to apply to North-West Europe; Well, admittedly in every country in a specific way, also depending on the political situation.

“ Traditionally there's a program that needs a building and now there are buildings looking for a program – this requires a different attitude ”

A carefully designed and precisely selected intervention sets something in motion, more than the thing itself. We focus on forms of collaboration, between technology, science, and interested parties, with the designer occupying a central place, and amassing knowledge. And that knowledge has to be translated to smart design interventions, which in their turn need design craft. But rapidly signaling and utilizing when things become vacant is important too. Vacancy occurs, but use it somehow.

AO **Designing is a curious activity. On the one hand the designer waits for a phone call, a question that has to be answered, on the other hand you're creating something that originates from yourself, that is a projection of yourself on the world.**

RR Sometimes we set the intervention in a wider context, a bigger story. Sometimes we start from a bigger story and proceed to what is possibly a small intervention, which can inspire people and interested parties, and enable them to interact differently with a subject – as with the installation of the pavilion in Venice.

ER As a philosopher I carry out research at the University of Amsterdam into everyday practice and the affordances it requires. A classic example of an affordance of that type is the campfire. It unites, seemingly as a matter of fact, people who do not know one another at all. Maarten Hajer and Arnold Reijndorp single out how strangers become 'familiar strangers'. We seek to apply insights like that in our designs, for example the floating New Amsterdam Park (NAP), giving various groups the chance to program their own strip of park. In that way you design a confrontation of differences rather than designing them under the carpet or denying them, as is generally the case.

AO **Does an interior design also have a political side?**

RR It certainly does, traditionally seen with a public library, for instance. But also with the thinking from a national political ambition, as is the case with Soesterberg or Vacant Appsterdam.

ER Or if it's intended for a work use and you want to make it suitable to sleep in. This touches on bigger issues.

AO **But the importance of the encounter between the interior and public space you referred to earlier has been going on for some time now. That device on the table here – my iPhone – features greatly in determining my public persona.**

RR That's happening, true – as is the inverse. Go to the lake district near here and you won't reach it unless you have a house beside the lake. Fences everywhere. The public area is becoming increasingly private.

AO **What do you mean with 'relating the potential of vacant buildings to the characteristics of innovation', which you quote as a goal for the Vacant NL Master's program?**

ER We examined how the national government's policy for the top sectors can be coupled with spatial conditions, and how vacancy can make a contribution.

RR For instance, by facilitating craftsmanship in the city – something that has virtually disappeared.

ER But we're examining, with Philips, how their innovation program interacts with spatial conditions as well.

AO **Do you see the projects you carry out as explorations or as the acquisition of ever more expertise in a specific field?**

RR That is indeed a problem. Before you know where you are, you're an expert in airport transformation or the vacant building expert, and you get only assignments of that nature. That's not what we want. At the same time, Vacant NL is so comprehensive that you could extract a thousand new challenges from it.

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