

**2004**

## **Lessons in Resilience**

Vlaardingen. "A Dutch municipality in the province of South Holland, near the river Nieuwe Maas, west of Schiedam, 26.65 km<sup>2</sup>, named after the Vlaarding stream," that's what my encyclopaedia teaches me. I also found out about the rise and fall of this once so very proud village. In 1574 the community was under siege from a group of plundering soldiers who left behind a trail of destruction. Then, when the village was finally rebuilt, a quarter of a century later, a terrible fire destroyed everything of beauty and grace. But Vlaardingen showed resilience. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the town blossomed then once again, slowly, became forgotten. Thanks to urbanisation and industrialisation Vlaardingen has come under the wing of Rotterdam and with any luck has, for the last time, come out of a dip and re-established itself. In the fifties and sixties the town profited from the oil refineries and chemical industry situated on the other side of the Maas. The town became a Mecca for commuters who congregated in suburbs like Westwijk.

Geometrically designed by enlightened and qualified city planners, just like the commuters and petrochemical workers moulded from the same ideal of progress, Westwijk is a paragon of civilisation and good intentions. Order and regularity determine the pattern of architecture, infrastructure, public space and garden facilities. Even the playful variations in the decor are the result of careful calculations. As early as 1860, Russian writer Alexander Herzen wrote: 'In the Netherlands the revolution is complete and happiness has come within an arm's length.' The Netherlands was the country 'through which Europe would start to grow grey.' Dutch city planners show us, he continues, 'that one does not live to fulfil destiny but is born exclusively to live for the day.' Dutch city culture may thus be the final aim of cultural developments in Europe, but that does not yet mean that living in such a city is not worth it: "Are there no perils encountered in the love life of the Dutch? No conflicts? No scandals? Do they never fall in love in Holland, don't they ever cry, can't you hear any laughter, do they never sing songs, or never drink gin?"

The kinds of thoughts entered my head on my first visit to De Strip in Westwijk. De Strip was once a proud shopping centre at the heart of the new suburb of Westwijk, but is now awaiting restructuring and better times. For the umpteenth time it will be expected that Vlaardingen will stand firm, lick her wounds and be ready in anticipation for new challenges and developments. In the contemporary 'global city', of which Vlaardingen is an irrevocable part, deconstruction and reconstruction are inseparably connected to every city development. Contemporary cities, says David Harvey, are 'hyperactive locations of creative destruction.' In his tracks, Ida Susser and Jane Schneider have introduced the term 'wounded cities' (*Wounded Cities, 2003*). A city cannot exist outside of the processes that generate, maintain, undermine, restructure, renew and destroy it. Just as a rainforest doesn't exist as a single entity but is a collective term for a multiplicity of distinguishable forests that alternately stimulate and dominate each other. Thus, city exists as a never-ending series of creative and destructive urban processes.

Like Alexander Herzen, the twentieth century avant-garde movement also saw the city as an independent entity; as a self-sufficient miniature state; as a conspiracy of fortune and architecture that should be totally dismantled to make place for the ideal city, set up according to the wishes and dreams of its inhabitants - think of Constant's New Babylon. In reality, the 'Society of the Spectacle' still exists, but has been transformed to a much less unambiguous and an infinitely more complex whole, of extra-national urban processes. These days referred to as 'globalisation.' In the countless processes of deconstruction and reconstruction that Vlaardingen has been through, this contemporary city also collapses into a wounded city - as a location of creative destruction.

De Strip acts as a model for the wounded city. The art project in the deserted shopping centre marks an 'interzone': a brief pause, a temporary black hole between deconstruction and reconstruction. As a work of art in a public space, De Strip does not represent a nostalgic reflection on the losses of Westwijk and gives no euphoric remarks about the restructuring of this part of the city. De Strip provides artists and local residents with the opportunity to discuss their livelihood in this wounded city. Like how Jasper van der Made built a pavilion from the remains of a wooden house that had been removed from another location in Rotterdam (Kralingen) as part of a

similar process of restructuring. Moreover, the inspiration to open an annex of Museum Boijmans van Beuningen was not accidental. Elsewhere in the 'global city', think of PS1 in Queens (New York), the establishment of an art institute gave the local cultural and economic infrastructure a fantastic impulse, through which the wounded city could speed up its recovery. In view of this lesson in resilience, Boijmans could have considered building its new wing, not in the museum quarter, but in Spangen or Hoogvliet.

Showroom Mama from Rotterdam's Witte de Withstraat has likewise been represented at De Strip. The exhibition of stickers, referring to the beating, commercial heart of the 'global city', shows a contrary side of the wounded city. As David Harvey rightly remarked, the wounds are surely caused by 'the expansion of capital flow, guided by new technology, new methods of organisation and a surge of new groups of people from all corners of the world.' Sticker culture is perhaps the most succinct response to the advertised reality of globalisation. Makers of stickers interact with logo and billboard culture, that these days dominates our public spaces, by adding their own logos and images to what is already on hand. Sometimes stickers act as 'open job applications' to advertising agencies and other times as 'criticism' on commercial visual culture. Even though their continued plea for 'non-commercial urban zones' remains ambiguous (after all, they draw their right to exist and status from the very same urban zones) by presenting a metropolitan sticker collection in wounded Westwijk (a non-commercial zone) does create a greater awareness of the connection between developments in the centre of Rotterdam with Westwijk in Vlaardingen. Perhaps Van Heeswijk could have anticipated this by inviting Nike to set up temporary shop at De Strip: the closely tied relationship between sticker culture and logo culture would as a result have been more strongly accentuated.

De Strip, as an art project in the wounded periphery of Rotterdam, with the presence of Museum Boijmans van Beuningen and Showroom Mama can be considered as a 'value adding power', as Saskia Sassen wrote in *The Global City* (2001). Today, housing associations and project developers make gratifying use of the creativity of artists. Temporary reuse of desolate warehouses and shops, combined with re-energising often poor cultural infrastructure with new activities and initiatives, could

give future restructuring processes a push in the right direction. A boring neighbourhood without doubt becomes hip. In the 'global city' art and economics have formed an alliance. Art, lifestyles and brands inject 'a vision of the good life' into the society. Sassen sees this as a 'new social aesthetic' that not only influences everyday life but is also a 'profit making technique' that applies to project developers. De Strip as well, offers a vision of that good life: the exhibition of submissions for the Rotterdam Design Prize from Museum Boijmans van Beuningen as well as the sticker exhibition from Mama, video presentations, performances by hip hop acts and the use of space for culinary undertakings, all are witness to a cultural revaluation ('gentrification') of Westwijk. Or within the terms of 'wounded cities' and 'global cities': art officiates as a medium to speed up both the healing process of a wounded city and the process of globalisation.

As such De Strip is far removed from the romantic ideal of twentieth century artists and activists, who squat in buildings on the periphery setting themselves up as artist initiatives or exhibition spaces. Searching for autonomy and authenticity, however, they paved the way for restructuring and gentrification. De Strip has passed beyond that level of innocence. When the project ends in May 2004, the former shopping centre will be cleanly swept and given back to its owners. The emptiness that will follow once the art has been removed will perhaps be the most poignant monument in Westwijk: symbolising a new lesson in resilience.