

# AMSTERDAM AND THE PLAYGROUNDS : FROM URBAN INNOVATION TO HUMAN IMPACT.

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Anouchka Lettré



Laurierstraat Playground, Aldo van Eyck, Amsterdam 1960s  
(Photo: © Ed Suister, courtesy Amsterdam City Archives)

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Amsterdam's economic cycles have been traditionally followed by urban development. Indeed, the unprecedented prosperity of the golden age period led to the extension of the historical downtown with the now-famous canals and the Jordaan district. Facing the economic decline of the city during the 18th century, the North Sea Canal was built, leading to a new wave of prosperity with direct access between the city and the sea. The massive rural migrations coming from the simultaneous industrial revolutions in the 19th century emphasises the housing shortage of the city which needed to be extended in order to welcome the growing working class.

Following the second world war, the dutch traditional centre for culture and commerce is suffering. First of all the society loss in terms of both population and architectural patrimony marks the beginning of a long period of social and physical reconstruction. Abandoned interstices are standing everywhere, offering available places for further developments. Moreover the post war baby boom came to reinforce the lack of housing that Amsterdam was already facing before the war and which became even more important after it.

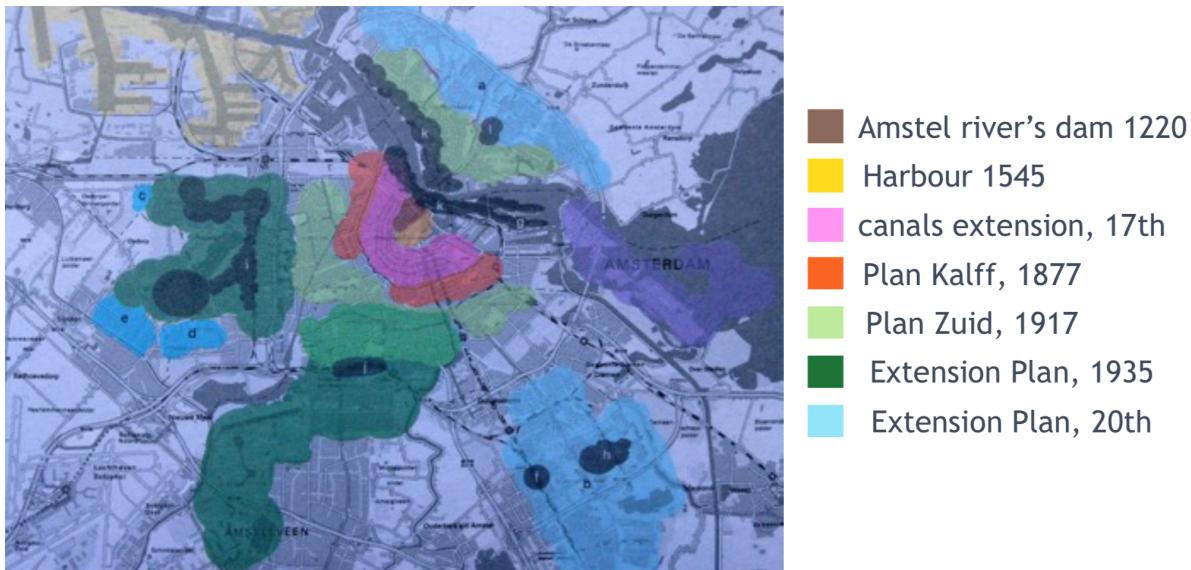
This essay will address Aldo Van Eyck's playgrounds which opened a new era for Amsterdam and its community during the after-war period. We will present these architectural elements as urban innovations in the sense of an architectural process seeking to continuously improve the human existing conditions of the city, as well as a new way of building and implementing architecture within the urban environment.

Our three sections will analyse and discuss the lack of efficiency of Amsterdam's first urban plans, the political answer found in the playgrounds' architectural and innovative urban potential, and the political and social impacts their large implementation created in the dutch society. How can simple architectural elements such as playgrounds lead to the revival of an entire society? How can this operation give Amsterdam and its people a new identity? How can they be considered as urban innovations and a worldwide model for other cities' future development?

## I Towards a Modern Amsterdam

### A/ The obsession : Extending the city

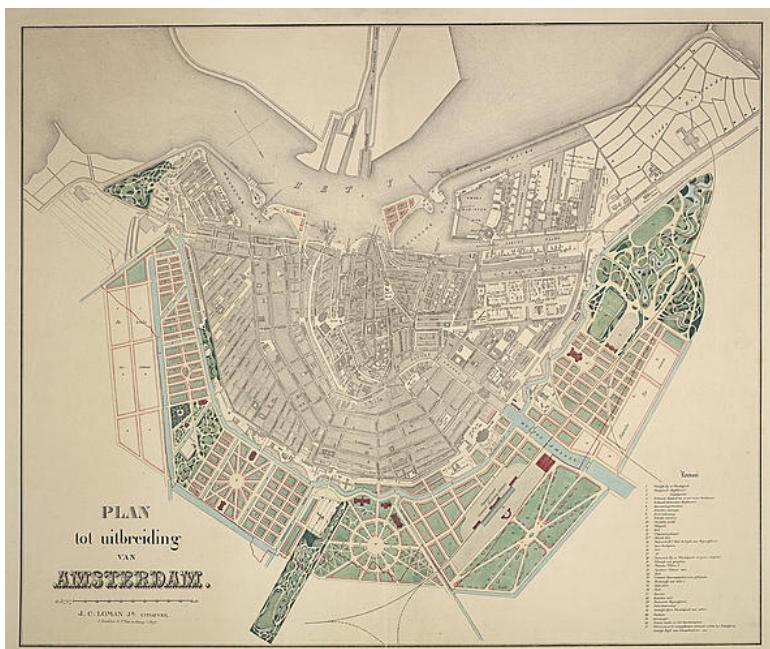
Since the 13th century and the first dam on the Amstel River, the Dutch invented the idea of land-use planning. The collective political actions to build dikes and control water are at the origin of the Dutch democracy which lies in this co-operative dike-building.



The growth of a city.

Department of physical planning et Al., 2009.

In the 19th century the industrial city is overcrowded, the population has grown very quickly and the city needs rapid extensions. In 1877 with the plan KALFF, the demolition of the city walls allow a first concentric ring of new residential neighbourhoods . The Insanitary living conditions and the lack of decent housing led to the Housing Act obliging the city council to draw up expansion plans and housing corporations to respect a strict regulation.



Plan KALFF, 1877

ARCAM/Architectura & Natura Press, Amsterdam, 2005.

The Plan Zuid (Berlage) in 1917 forecasted more concentric expansions of housing blocks and green areas around the central canals. The modern aspects lie in the importance of air, light and space within the conception of the buildings. The equal attention to design of public places (green areas) led to life improvement in the new neighbourhoods. This plan did not manage to solve the lack of housing and in 1928 the department of urban development was set up.

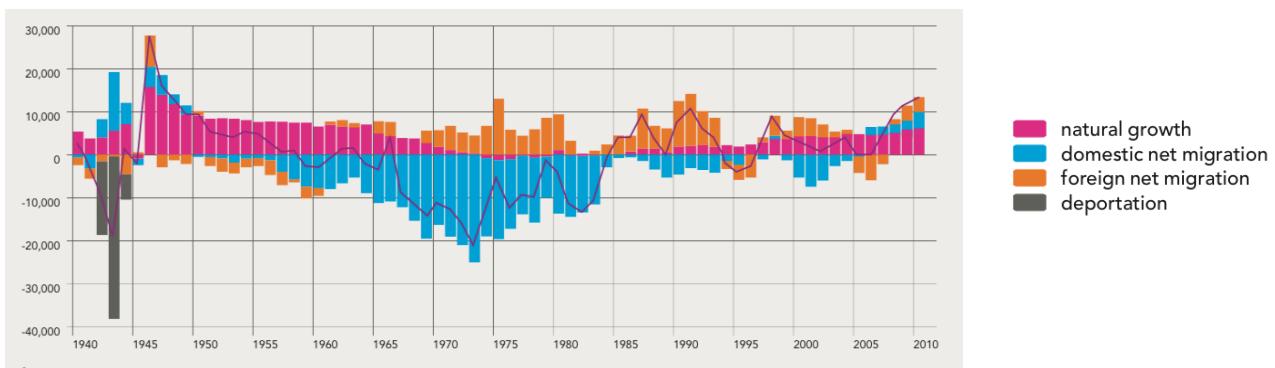
This department was charged with forecasting a very ambitious and long term planning of the city until the 2000s and resulted in the Amsterdam extension plan (AUP) of 1935. After being stopped during the war, its application started again in 1945 with the development of tall flats in green space, raised road and open areas. The new incomes are found in a mix of high, medium, and low rise. It led to the creation of the western suburbs (i), recreational areas (j) such as "Amsterdamse", (1951) and the North/south Extension in 1958-1959 with the creation of "Amsterdam Noord" and "Amsterdam Zuid". In green and red below the two functions : recreation and living are strictly separated.



Amsterdam Extension Plan, 1935.  
Fundación Caixa de Arquitectos. Barcelona. 2003

Amsterdam's intense efforts to plan the city early stressed the shift from architecture into urban planning. The successive first urban plans focusing on the development of new residential neighbourhoods and postwar extensions aimed at answering the lack of quantitative and qualitative housing of one period. These successive extensions were the only focus of Amsterdam's urban planning until the middle of the 20th century.

## B/ City centre pauperisation, Renovation project and Social crisis



Amsterdam growth, Jansen and Jeroen Slot, 2011.

The social problems lying in the industrial city and its growing working class, have been solved by strict functional segregation in which living, working, recreation, and traffic are separated. The CIAM came to reinforce the functionalist method with the publication of the Athens Charter written by Le Corbusier in 1943. Designing places and implementing new buildings and parks, has been done without linking activities on the ground. Indeed the people of Amsterdam were watching a fast architectural development without being part of it or without being consulted.

As a result, the first decades of the second half of the 20th century focused exclusively on new expansions of Amsterdam to manage the growing population. During this time the historical downtown has been completely forgotten and the living and building conditions were depreciated. Following the model of the “Haussmanisation” in Paris, dutch urban policies were made by a very strong state willing to organise the urban environment in a strict way.

Within the AUP, the council wanted to get rid of the central insalubrity, as well as to connect the different parts of the new city in facilitating commuting flows. Getting rid of the oldest buildings and the inappropriate narrow traffic routes, was seen as a necessity to gain space in order to widen big avenues for cars and to build new metro lines. Therefore the council forecasted the demolition and reconstruction of the Nieuwmarktbuurt historical district.

With the announcement of this new renovation project, Amsterdam soon faced huge demonstrations which turned into a social crisis. The residents followed by the all community of Amsterdam, were protesting against the destruction of the historical centre and calling the government to find realistic answers responding to their needs and demands. The final maintenance and restoration of the downtown instead of its destruction emphasised the shift from a strong government into an inclusive governance.

## C/ Political awareness : a new “reality” for the community

With the rise of the social movements, the government understood that the housing development was not the only issue. Because the chaotic city had to be organised, and since the previous functionalist architecture of Amsterdam killed the human dynamism between places, the city council had to find a very quick solution in order to gather people and to bring social peace immediately.

The political answer, to be efficient, had to give satisfaction to the majority of the dutch families. After 1945, it was the baby boom, the children mass had no spaces inside or outside their houses designed for them (Ana Mendez de Andés, 2010), despite a few rich segregated private areas, public playgrounds were inexistent. The decision of designing an open playground for every neighbourhood in Amsterdam came from the office of town planning in 1947.

Indeed playgrounds represented a political acceptance and progress regarding the development of leisure within an emancipated society. At this time other issues such as insalubrity and housing shortage could have appeared as being much more important than recreational activities. But the modern community was communicating with the political instances and they needed to be heard and listened to.

Designing and implementing playgrounds was a very innovative and surprising answer since apart from bringing a new identity and territory for the children of Amsterdam, the strategy responded to an undefined class' social and cultural needs. Designing playgrounds everywhere was a modern project which had never been done before in any city.

To conclude, the new playgrounds project can be perceived as an experimental solution aiming at solving social conflict. On the one hand the protestations against the new master plan, forecasting the extension of highways and metro-lines in the old Amsterdam, denounced the lack of creativity and the need for new public places. On the other hand designing public places accessible to children was seen as a planning emergency in Amsterdam where no infrastructure allowed them to be considered as a social class.

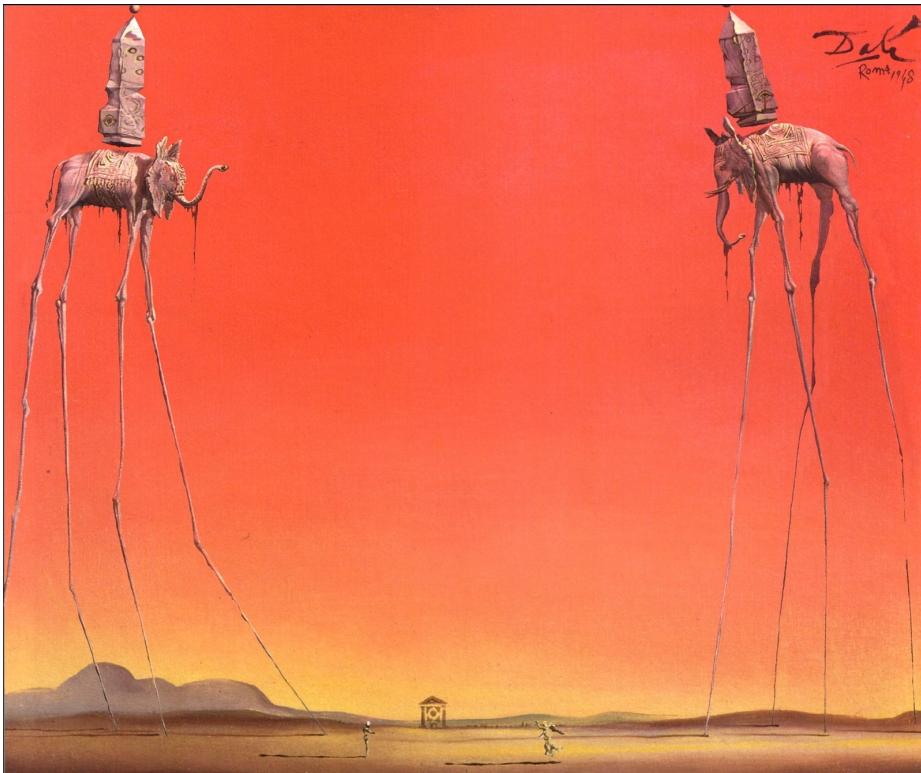
## II The “playground” : applying innovation in architecture

First of all an “urban Innovation” is by nature flexible, simple, well designed and pleasant to use. Innovation is not a complex idea, but can be found in the simplest elements of our surrounding environment.

### A/ Understanding Aldo Van Eyck’s “avant garde” philosophy

Strictly opposed to functionalist projects, Aldo Van Eyck had been hired in 1946 to work for the town planning office on the extension projects of Amsterdam. “Functionalism has killed creativity” (Aldo Van Eyck) is the starting point of Van Eyck's architecture. Since Aldo did not fit with the vision of the planning office, he was soon reassigned to a “less important” project, the design of the 700 Amsterdam playgrounds.

What is important is to understand the point of view and especially the background of this “indecipherable personality” (Vittorio Gregotti). In fact his “incoherent doctrine” (Oriol Bohigas) can not be restricted to architecture only, but embraces an entire philosophy (Strauven, 1998) since Aldo Van Eyck has developed an internationally oriented personal culture (Francis Strauven, 1998).



Elephant, Dali, Roma, 1948.

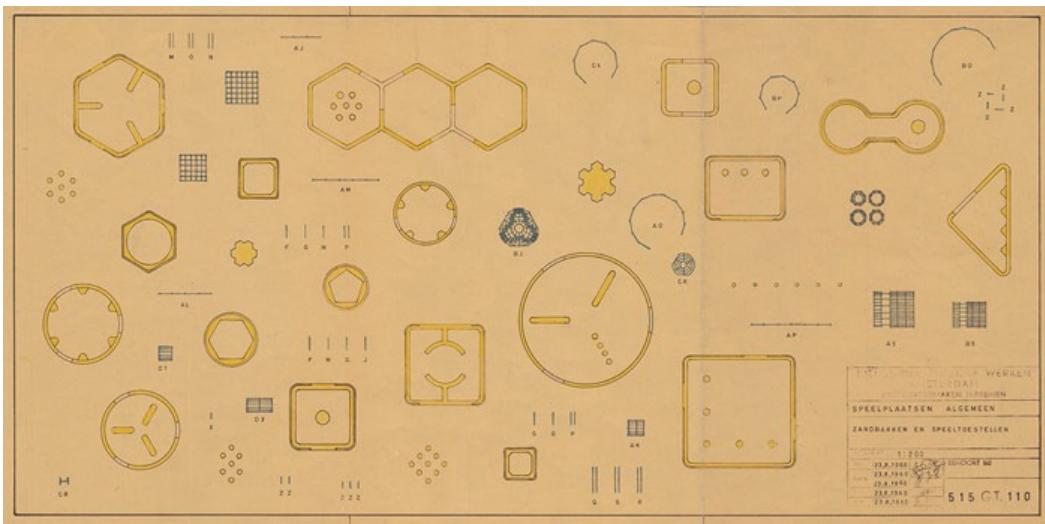
From his stay in Zurich where he fell in love with surrealism, through Dali's "paranoiac critical method to reveal inner-reality", to the "Cobra" and the "De Stijl" movements, Aldo never stopped being inspired by artists. Surrealist principles can be linked to his architectural heritage through the rejection of any forms of traditions. The mixture of primitive figures and suggestive signs make paintings accessible for everyone and allow different manifestations of the real world, allowing us the possibility to choose the one we want to be real. Moreover the one which is real is not meant to stay the same in form because of the time impact.

The primitive forms of housing he met in Africa and his different travels in non western cultures led to the development of his architectural "elementary". According to him, the elementary means and functions are the tools to respond to a real and global situation regardless of the time. Moreover, thinking outside of the box remains the only way to create innovation. Aldo was looking for a new reality for the community, reality he found in the modern elementary visions reflected in the playgrounds.

## B/ "the elementary" and the multi meaning of space

The hard challenge to encourage all the children of Amsterdam to play in every corner of the city will lead to the revival of communities in abandoned, non used places and create new connections between segregated places. For Aldo Van Eyck, a new innovative way of thinking and designing our environment had to emerge in giving a new psychological and emotional aspect to urban places.

Indeed he wanted the spirits of the children to imagine the different functions of the game's structure mainly organised around four minimalist characteristics. The sandpit is the largest and central element and can have many dimensions and forms, from a triangle or a hexagon to a circle or a square. The cylindrical concrete stones can be jumping blocks or simple places of relaxation to have a chat, they can be implemented in the sandpits or as individual elements outside of it. The large area of mobil play between the elements is often delimited by the presence of climbing and somersault frames.



Playground Equipment, Sandpits and Climbing Frames Plan, Scale 1:200, 1960  
Aldo Van Eyck, drawings, Photo: © courtesy Aldo van Eyck Archive.

This new participative architecture based on minimal equipments was made to stimulate the minds and movements of the children. What makes an architecture or an infrastructure readable and hospitable for men is the twin phenomena (Aldo Van Eyck). Relating the human to the place and the place to the human is the necessary freedom degree that makes a space hospitable (Francis Strauven, 1998). Therefore the city had to be adapted to the child, the child can decide the meaning of the elements, how to use it and create the rules of the game.

## C/ Places, Occasions, and Local implementations



Playgrounds can be appreciated as spaces of decompartmentalization, up against any form of social segregation. The adaptation of the city to the child has been possible in not disconnecting him from the urban environment. The playgrounds were open spaces in public places, integrated in their surrounding environments in interconnection with the rest of the community.

The geometric plan of solid, concrete elements and slender constructions is an innovation since all the 4 elements are so simple, cheap and easy to implement that they can be declined in every part of the city, in any kind of sites, in between two different functional areas or infrastructures. On a local scale the “in-between” phenomena represents available interstices and opportunities to improve living conditions. On a city scale it is a way of solving and reconnecting the strict separation led by disconnected functional places.

A sidewalk is a playground.  
Aldo Van Eyck, Saffierstraat 1951.



Abandoned interstice, Aldo Van Eyck, Amsterdam centrum, XXème century.

A playground can be created on a sidewalk, a big square, an abandoned interstice, between two walls or under a bridge... Therefore Aldo Van Aleck used any places and occasions to develop playgrounds in Amsterdam and this is also an innovative new structural insight in architecture.

Moreover their “elementary” aspect allowed infinite possibilities of replication in different environments and with different compositions. Indeed the 700 playgrounds built in Amsterdam were all different in terms of their assemblages, sizes, forms and possible utilisations. Each playground is a unique infrastructure which adapts itself to every situation and urban forms according to the physical conditions on the ground. These compositions of similar simple elements envisioned transformation (Katie Crepeau, 2014) with the good local answer.



Renewal of a postwar interstice, Aldo Van Eyck. Dijkstraat, Amsterdam centrum. 1954

### III From implementations to human impacts

#### A/ From an unexpected success : Bertelmanplein

The first game has been implemented in Bertelmanplein in a southern district as a simple experimentation in 1947. The small public square (25\*30 m) of the Northwest corner of Berlage's Amsterdam South is composed of a broad-edged sandpit, leaving a large area of mobil play articulated by somersault frames. The round stones contained in the sandpit and the arch-shapes climbing frames can be used in many different ways. Five benches and a few trees are delimited the open space.

This implementation of elementary elements was a success for both the community and the city council. Indeed the residents support has been impressive, the department of planning of Amsterdam received hundreds of letters asking directly Aldo Van Eyck to build more playgrounds.

In satisfying people, the government realised the importance of including their participation in decision making processes. The simple implementation of an experimental process also highlights the importance of experimenting and implementing new objects while there is a need and a social rupture.



First playground Experimentation.  
Amsterdam South, Aldo Van Eyck, 1945.

## B/ To a network of playgrounds for Amsterdam



From the downtown to the new suburbs, playgrounds expansion.

Architecture Case Study by Ki Jun Lo. 2002.

After the success of this first implementation, the new playgrounds would be entrusted to the supervision of the general public (Katie Crepeau, 2014). Around 700 games have been implemented in 30 years between 1947 and 1978. Public places of connexions and social mix have successfully re-connected people and functions within the city. The voice of both the community and the government have been unified through a simple innovative project. Linking urban structure and activity dynamics became a global priority for Amsterdam.



Historical centre under revitalisation  
Aldo Van Eyck, Zeedijk, 1956.

There were not point specific interventions on a set of well defined or predetermined locations. Playgrounds have been implemented where occasions were present on the ground, stressing the development of an unplanned architecture which can be of grand benefits. This approach is very interesting since it emphasises a break up in the extensive dutch planning which always needed to be extremely supervised.

From the first implementation to the network of playgrounds, two phases of implementation have to be distinguished. From 1945 to 1955, the playgrounds were implemented within the historical and insalubrious centre of postwar Amsterdam. The impact has been very positive and led to the revival of the downtown with the regeneration of abandoned places.



New connection in the western postwar district.  
Aldo Van Eyck, Spielinsel, Buskenblaserstraat 1955.

From 1955 to 1978, the implementations were oriented toward the postwar new neighbourhoods, in the western and northern part of the city, and played a role of reconnection between the segregated communities.

### C/ And the basis of a modern society

The decision to build one playground in every single neighbourhood of the city had been forecast to unify the people of Amsterdam within a period of social crisis and after urban failures. The success they provided was something that no one could have anticipated.

In urban planning they led to the successful reutilisation of abandoned and unhealthy places, the regeneration of a city aiming at creating a liveable city (Jeane Jacobs, 1961). In urban planning, this architectural model can be applied in many contexts worldwide by envisioning urban needs in upgrading abandoned and non used spaces, with experimentation, and in responding to the real need by local implementation.

The ground up approach to planning and public participation led to the Creation of true socialisation places (Elsa Sidawy, 2010) and the construction of a new post war mixed community. The council of Amsterdam facing this success changed its policies and started to be inclusive, which is still the case today with the current governance of Amsterdam.

From a social point of view, this success stressed the break up from the post war society into a modern one. Public places can be designed in order to unite us or to separate us, and in Amsterdam, new shared environments have stressed the shift toward a modern society. Indeed from the urban separation reflected in the creation of the first ghettos in Venise then in Varsovie, the playgrounds have been a model of reunion in terms of both functions and communities.

This spatial experiment stressed the shift toward the development of modern architecture giving space to creativity and innovation in urban policies and project implementations. The creation of public spaces designed to be used, shared and lived by the citizens stressed the shift toward a smart city.



Bertelmanplein, Daryl Mulvihill, 2014

The idea of creating playgrounds opened a new wave of modernisation during the second part of the 20th century, in which places have been endowed with new functions. Representing the first places of leisure in the birth of a new society, the games broke the idea of work alienation and urban chaos of the industrial city. It brought a new and fresh urban climate for the community.

By playing with restructuration of spaces without destroying places, Amsterdam is today an example in terms of urban innovation and participative governance. Since this period, the children population decreased and even if around 90 games are still alive, many of them have been removed to transform places and endow them with new specific functions (Nowadays they have been often turned into parking places). Amsterdam opened the way with a new temporary architecture on demands, indeed playgrounds, as places of reconnection and disconnection, have been used as efficient transformation tools responding to the social and political needs of one specific period.

In re-inventing abandoned places or extending sidewalks, Ayeck showed us how public places can be re-used as functional platforms. They are never immutable but led to permanent creative deconstructions and reconstructions (Joseph Schumpeter, 1942). A city is made to live until its next transformation, following the waves of innovation of our urban society. Spaces are places of innovation, not designed to stay, but designed to be consumed until their death and reinvention. What matters is their utilisation. “Today, a rising population of architects and designers are working in under-resourced communities around the world, where their skill in envisioning transformation is essential.” (Katie Crepeau, 2014).

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