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Gozewijn Bergenhenegouwen and Jan van Weesep



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Gozewijn Bergenhenegouwen and Jan van Weesep

This article is based on research on two counterlocales in the Netherlands. The report was written by Gozewijn Bergenhenegouwen in partial fulfillment of the requirements for his master's degree at the Faculty of Geographical Sciences of Utrecht University. Professor Jan van Weesep coached him during the project.

- 1 The “Beurstraverse” is widely acclaimed for its contribution to the commercial revival of the downtown shopping precinct as well as to the revitalization of Rotterdam's downtown. By the late 1980s, the downtown shopping precinct had slipped down in reputation and commercial viability; the future of the “Lijnbaan” as Rotterdam's premier retail concentration was in doubt. By then, many of its potential patrons were flocking to new regional shopping centres at the edge of the city.
- 2 Two historical developments were held responsible for this situation. When it was completed in the 1950s, the “Lijnbaan”, in Rotterdam's modernist centre, was heralded as Europe's first downtown pedestrian open-air shopping mall. Thirty years later, however, the same physical design was sorely outdated. The second development was the segmentation of the downtown commercial centre; the busy Coolingsingel obstructed the circulation of shoppers between the Lijnbaan and the second major retail cluster downtown. Segmentation had undermined its appeal, and shoppers preferred to go to the new commercial centres on the city's edge. When the need to refurbish the Lijnbaan was recognized, the integration of the two retail clusters in the commercial heart of the city was placed at the top of the agenda.

Figure 1. Map of the Beurstraverse.

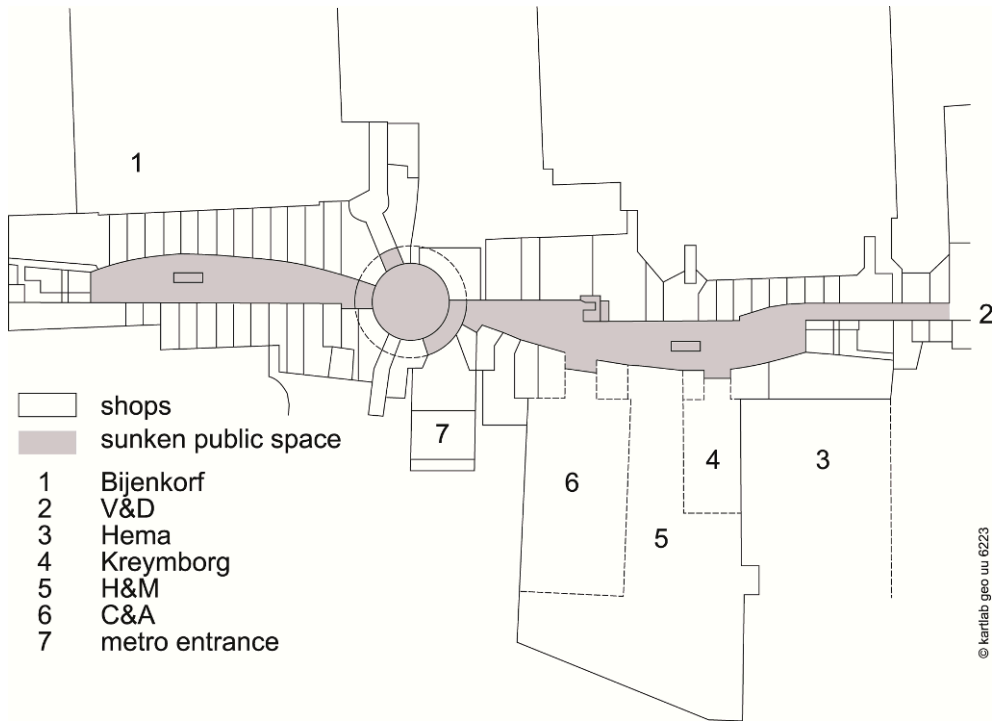


Figure 2. The western entrance of the Beurstraverse.



Photo: Gozewijn Bergenhenegouwen

Figure 3. Two levels of public space.



Photo: Gozewijn Bergenhenegouwen

Figure 4. A vendor of a newspaper of the homeless outside the Beurstraverse.



PHOTO: GOZEWIJN BERGENHENEGOUWEN

Privatized underpass

- 3 Construction of an underpass beneath the Coolingsingel was proposed in order to integrate the shopping district. To turn this underpass into an attractive feature, additional retail space was envisioned. This idea tied in with the existing situation: right there, an entrance to the metro station (“Beurs”) already accommodated several kiosks and shops. Moreover, the basements of the adjacent department stores could be accessed directly from the underpass. T+T Design, the architectural office of the developer MultiVastgoed, submitted preliminary sketches for the project. The city of Rotterdam backed the initiative, as it fit in with its policy for the city centre. But City Hall insisted on bringing in a well-known architect; eventually, Pi de Bruijn of the Amsterdam-based Architecten Cie arrived on the scene. In addition, an American firm, Jerde Partnership International, was brought on board for the interior design.
- 4 The underpass is part of “Beursplein”, a larger complex in the downtown commercial centre, where shopping, entertainment, and parking are combined with an extension of the residential function of the city centre. Now, Beursplein has much more than a retail underpass: an indoor shopping mall; an entire block devoted to three large department stores belonging to well-known Dutch retail conglomerates (C&A, Kreymborg, Hema); parking space; and a residential tower, the Schielandtoren. Furthermore, Beursplein is located in the heart of the downtown commercial centre close to its major office concentrations (e.g., Weena, Coolingsingel, Blaak/Westblaak, World Trade Centre, Coolse Poort). The proximity of recently completed residential developments (Hoge Heren, Kop van Zuid) and projected inner-city apartment complexes can reinforce its viability by ensuring the sustained presence of a primary market.
- 5 The “Beurstraverse” is essentially an excavated underpass, which allows pedestrians to cross the busy Coolingsingel safely below grade level. Many retail stores have been accommodated in this space. As the underpass also provides access to the metro station, it is not (and cannot be) closed off at night.
- 6 By combining several types of amenities, it was an instant success with the public. The design generated its nickname, the “Koopgoot” (“shopping trench”), and gave the centre instant name recognition, a classic element of commercial success.
- 7 The Beurstraverse is a success in several respects: it attracts many shoppers; it is an icon of Rotterdam, a city known for its innovative architecture; and it won the Urban Design Honor Award of the American Institute of Architecture in 1998. But this success story has another side; the area’s democratic character, its publicness, may have been compromised. It may seem counterintuitive to question the public character of the complex; the underpass cannot be closed-off like a building; and the envisioned spatial complementarity with adjacent areas has been achieved. The question arises from the prevalence of anti-democratic measures in the Beurstraverse: this space is privately owned and operated, whereas most of the adjacent streets and plazas are owned by the city and managed by its public agencies.
- 8 The composition of the consortium of owners of the “Beurstraverse” is rather surprising, in that the city of Rotterdam is part owner. But the city participates as a private party, not as a public actor. The main reason for the (semi)-privatization of this public space and for the municipal participation in the private consortium of owners is the desire to control the quality of the place to prevent degeneration of the area. (A

spokesman for the development company MultiVastgoed said the deteriorating Lijnbaan was a bad example in this respect.) According to a spokesperson for the municipality, the city would not be able to do enough in its public capacity to keep the quality of the area high. At the same time, the risk that a private party would barter away this important part of the city centre was unacceptably high. Thus, the argument ran, the city would have to play an important and permanent role in this project; only then could the area's envisioned contribution to the revitalization of the downtown commercial centre be safeguarded.

- 9 This "quality guarantee" pertains not only to physical aspects. Measures are also taken to manipulate the composition of the public. These measures turn the Beurstraverse into a "counterlocale", a public space that is not as public as it might seem.
- 10 The study from which this characterization is derived includes observations of the architectural setting and the daytime management operations. Furthermore, interviews were conducted with key informants; they include both public and private parties, and all were involved in the development and subsequent operation of the Beurstraverse. Spokespersons for the architectural firm, daily management, the Municipality of Rotterdam, and the real estate contributed information and their opinions, and they were asked to describe their aims, and motives.

Counterlocales

- 11 The concept "counterlocale" was coined by the American sociologist Lyn Lofland (1998) to define the nature of a place. It combines the two concepts of "locale" and "location", which were proposed by Anselm Strauss (1961), another American sociologist. In Strauss' view, a "locale" is a public place with a minimum level of segregation by lifestyle; in this respect, it is the opposite of a "location", which is defined as a place with a high level of segregation. Lofland's term counterlocale denotes a place that is explicitly designed to control such effects. It is a place where the composition of the visitors is monitored and manipulated to minimize the chance of uncomfortable and threatening social confrontations. The purpose is to remove the "hard edges" of the public realm in cities.
- 12 The public realm is defined by Lofland (1998) as "a world of strangers", a co-presence of unfamiliar individuals who are only categorically known to one another. It is the opposite of the private realm (characterized by intimate relations) and the parochial realm (characterized by communal relations). To be clear, in general usage, the word realm refers to the social content of a certain geographically bound space. Since the beginning of the nineteenth century, a bias has developed towards favoring private and parochial realms (Sennett, 1974). The public realm, which is expressed in the public space, lost a great deal of its attraction and its necessity for people. This self-reinforcing process has ultimately led to segregation, through "suburban flight" and the manifestation of counterlocales in the urban landscapes of today.
- 13 Because counterlocales are "set apart" from the rest of the city, the level of segregation by lifestyle has increased. The hard edges of the public realm are removed, but without generating a private or parochial realm. Counterlocales are "purified" and "sanitized" versions of Strauss' locales, being much less "public" than people realize at first sight.

Their nature is cultivated by careful management and the application of elaborate surveillance strategies that erode the democratic character of the public space.

Exclusion

- 14 Within this format, direct and indirect instruments of exclusion can be identified. Direct instruments to accomplish counterlocales are, according to Lofland (1998), privatization, shadow-privatization, the panoptical method, and the hide-away approach. The most drastic measure to create a counterlocale is the privatization of public space. This implies that a public party (for example a municipality) sells public space to a private party without safeguards for retaining the public nature of that space. The owner of the privatized space is free to choose a strategy for the optimal management of the area, within legal limits naturally. In this respect, the Beurstraverse is not a privatized but a shadow-privatized public space. As elsewhere, the method of "shadow-privatization" has been successfully applied by the authorities to stimulate the revitalization of a public space. (In the case of the Beurstraverse, the measure is intended to affect a wider part of the city centre.) This involves the transfer of the management of an area to a private management organization on the condition that the area would remain publicly accessible. The Municipality of Rotterdam, in its public capacity, imposed conditions to safeguard the public character of the Beurstraverse. The area had to remain accessible to the public; it had to complement rather than compete with the adjacent retail clusters in the city centre; and it had to serve as a portal for the metro, making it in effect a part of the public transportation system.
- 15 In spite of these imposed conditions, there are anti-democratic aspects in the management policy established by the consortium of owners. The management team of the Beurstraverse makes use of the panoptical method. Camera surveillance and a private security force are being used (other tools, such as movement sensor devices and one-way mirrors, are out of the question). The cameras are supposed to serve as a deterrent, monitor behavior, and generate evidence. The private security force is supposed to serve as a deterrent and a means to take action against undesired people or conduct. According to the spokesperson for the management, the private security force of the Beurstraverse does not tolerate the following types of people and conduct: people who create a nuisance for others; who consume alcohol or drugs; vendors of homeless newspapers; groups of youngsters while the area is crowded; solicitors for contributions to the World Wildlife Fund, etc. These criteria are symptomatic of the anti-democratic status of this particular public space. The motive given for banning these people or conduct (the "hard edges" of the public realm) is that shoppers ought to enjoy a comfortable, clean, wholesome, and safe environment for their pursuit of consumption. The chance of undesired and threatening social confrontations has to be minimized. The motive underlying this policy is profit.
- 16 A note on legality should be made here. The private security officers have restricted authority. They cannot arrest people or force anyone to leave the Beurstraverse. The municipal police force is the only body vested with that authority. The police force retains its prerogative of active oversight of the area. The combination of a private security force and the municipal police has been made possible by special user legislation to guarantee public safety and security on the private property of the

"Beurstraverse" in the protocol of the general police mandate of the municipality. The protocol has thus been amended to create a safe haven for shoppers.

- 17 The hide-away approach has not been used, because its converse, namely spatial complementarity, was a key condition in the development process. Nor are there any denial cues, elements in the design that hide the publicness of a space. The Beurstraverse is for the greater part in the open air, trees are growing there, fountains entertain the visitors, and the shops are not deliberately exclusive. Conceivably, the warmth of the materials used and the soft yellow streetlights, which contrast with the texture of the surrounding public space, could be interpreted as "denial cues". There are other means to exclude the "hard edges" of the public realm. Such instruments, intended to minimize the chance of undesired and threatening social confrontations, can be classified as methods to create "sadistic street environments", a concept elaborated by Mike Davis (1992; see also Lofland, 1998). In general, these instruments discourage certain people from making use of the public space or exhibiting certain behavior. For instance, spiked metal bars may be installed to stop people from sitting on ledges; benches may be fitted out with multiple armrests to prevent people from lying down; ledges may be placed too high and planters made too tall to sit on; any obstacles that could block the view might be removed; waste baskets may be designed to deter people from taking things out; and public lavatories and water fountains may be located out of sight. A few of these instruments are in use in the Beurstraverse. First, there are no places that are conducive to loitering; no benches, no ledges. Furthermore, the design offers no hiding places and no dead ends. Finally, there are no catering activities going on after the shops are closed. They have to close because such facilities could attract undesirable people and misconduct at night. Thus, although the instruments are not of the more "aggressive" type, the Beurstraverse can be classified as a sadistic street environment.

Changing public geography

- 18 In spite of the spatial and functional complementarity, and given the general strategies and motives of the development company and the management practices, the Beurstraverse can be defined as a counterlocale. The area is shadow-privatized; panoptical instruments to control the visitors are being used; and some elements of a sadistic street environment can be found. It is a place where the composition of the public is monitored and manipulated to minimize the chance of undesired and threatening social confrontations. The "hard edges" of the public realm are being excluded to generate a prettified and suburbanized environment. William Whyte called these kinds of spaces "defensible spaces" (Zukin, 1995). Mike Davis refers to them as "pseudo-public spaces" (1992; see also Zukin, 1995). The increase of such spaces will eventually lead to the emergence of an enclave-like city, where "have-nots" who are traditionally dependent on the public space become marginalized, and where the public realm, in all its diversity and cosmopolitan simultaneity, has no chance to prosper. Moreover, the management-imposed ban on vendors of newspapers of the homeless and on solicitors for the World Wildlife Fund, etc., illustrates how an important aspect of the public space is being ignored. Its function as mediator for people who have no other place to meet the broader society is being curtailed. In brief, the democratic and free character of the public space of today is under pressure.

- 19 The Beurstraverse in Rotterdam's downtown commercial centre is a public space that offers an alternative to public space in its original quality. The strategies to accomplish a counterlocale tarnish its democratic and free character, even if this is covered up by spatial complementarity, an open-air character, the presence of municipal police, and the fact that enforcement by the private security force in case of shoplifting or other problematic situations are hidden from view (there is a special room to deal with troublemakers). At first glance, the public, democratic character of the Beurstraverse does not seem to be questionable. A closer inspection reveals that the visitors are in a privatized space where they are monitored and manipulated.
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ABSTRACTS

In 1993, a new retail complex called "Beurstraverse" was opened in the core of Rotterdam's downtown commercial centre. In design, this complex differs sharply from that of the adjacent shopping precinct. An instant success, it was nicknamed the "Koopgoot", or "shopping trench". As an excavated passage under the Coolsingel, the major thoroughfare in the city center, the "trench" joins two retail concentrations that had been separated by the increasing traffic flow. This review focuses on the way the complex is operated, considering whether it is a substitute for public space or an extension of it. The point of departure is the concept of the "counterlocale", which denotes a space that appears to be public but is actually exclusive. This article evaluates how the space of the "Beurstraverse" is manipulated as well as the public use of it.

En 1993 un nouveau complexe commercial, le "Beurstraverse", s'est ouvert dans le centre commercial de Rotterdam. Ce complexe, dont le succès fut instantané, présente un aspect nettement différent de celui du quartier commerçant adjacent. Il a été surnommé "Koopgoot", ce qui signifie "la tranchée". Creusée sous le Coolsingel, qui est l'artère principale du centre-ville, la

“tranchée” relie deux concentrations de commerces de détail qui s’étaient retrouvées séparées par le flux croissant du trafic. Cet article examine la gestion de ce complexe, en particulier la question de savoir s’il s’agit d’un substitut à l’espace public ou une extension de celui-ci et ce à partir du concept de “counterlocale”, qui désigne un espace apparemment public qui est en réalité un espace fermé. L’article étudie en outre la manipulation de l’espace du “Beurstraverse”, ainsi que son usage public.

INDEX

Keywords: revitalization, public space, privatization, public realm, “counterlocale”, Netherlands, Rotterdam

Mots-clés: revitalisation, espace public, privatisation, domaine public, “counterlocale”, Pays-Bas, Rotterdam

AUTHORS

GOZEWIJN BERGENHENEGOUWEN

Faculty of GeoSciences, Utrecht University, gozewijnb@hotmail.com

JAN VAN WEESEP

Faculty of GeoSciences, Utrecht University, j.vanweesep@geog.uu.nl