

The Cultural Coalition for the Amsterdam Olympic Area

Hardware & Software Strategies for the Public Realm

Hans Karssenbergs Speech for the Annual Quality Streetscapes Conference, 3 May 2006, London

Outside the Olympic Stadium in Amsterdam is a statue of Prometheus, commemorating the fact that here, in Amsterdam, the Olympic fire was lit for the first time in 1928. It was, after all, Prometheus who stole fire from the gods to give it to the people. Man having been saved, Zeus was enraged with Prometheus and chained him to the Caucasus. For 30,000 years he remained there. Each day an eagle came and picked out his liver, which grew back at night. The torture lasted day in and day out, until finally Hercules delivered him.

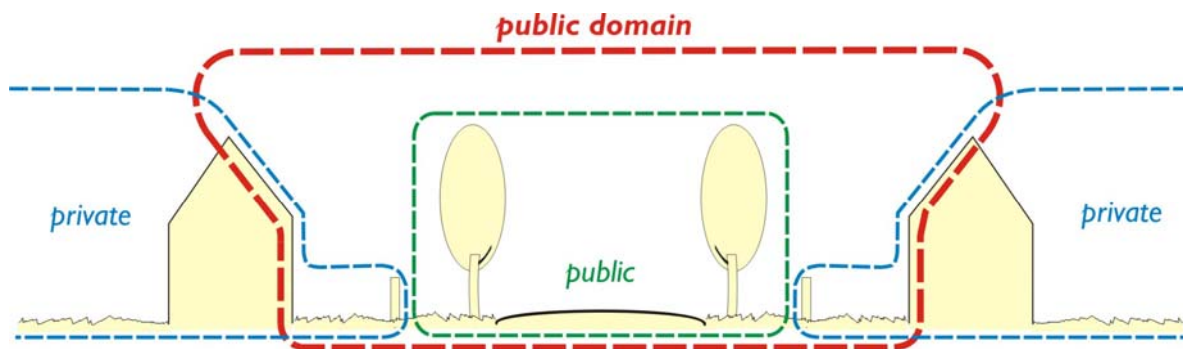


The story of Prometheus symbolises to me what has happened to the Olympic Stadium and the square in front of it, the Stadionplein. But first, allow me to introduce myself.

My name is Hans Karssenbergs. I am one of the founders of Stipo, a consulting agency for people, spaces, strategy and innovation. The Stipo approach was thought out at the University of Amsterdam and developed in daily practice. Our office is in Amsterdam. We work all over the Netherlands and on a number of international projects as well.

To start off with, I would like to share a few thoughts on designing public spaces. I regard myself as a spatial strategist, not a designer. I see myself as someone who helps create the many hundreds of conditions necessary to achieve the best design and the best use of space.

We apply this principle in all kinds of spatial development projects. In all cases, we aim at extremely high quality, for present and future users. In our vision, the public domain plays a crucial part.

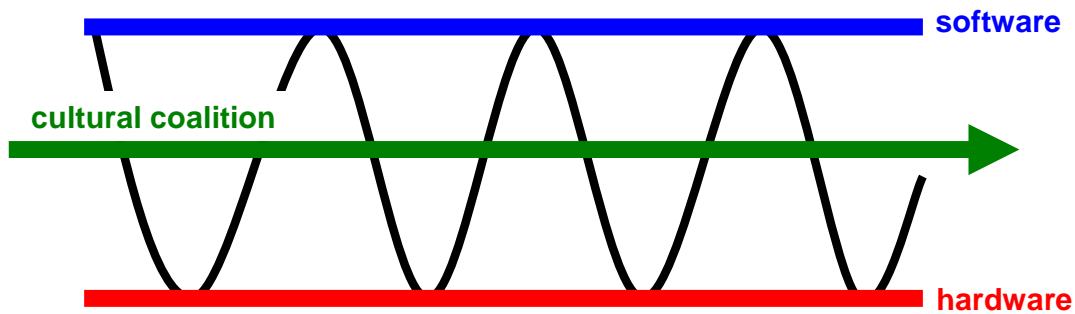


Stipo Consult 2001

'Public Domain'

For starters, let me explain our concept of the 'public domain'. In our view, everything you see, including facades of private buildings, belongs to the public domain. This places a heavy responsibility with private owners. But public domain is more than just physical space: it also encompasses 'public life', the

interaction between all kinds of user groups. This interaction can take place in both public and private or semi-private spaces. Public domain, therefore, is much more than just 'public space'.



We put two key elements at the centre of our approach: hardware (design) and software (life). This is the hub of everything I want to tell you today.

Hardware and software

I would like to demonstrate the width of possible applications. I will therefore very briefly touch upon the way in which we've arrived at innovative concepts and strategies in a number of projects. I will then proceed to zoom in on the Stadionplein project in Amsterdam.



1. *Kultuurstraat Enschede*

- For this regeneration project in Enschede South, we have developed the so-called civic steering method: a combination of social and spatial planning. So rather than just demolition and building, we also worked on neighbourhood pride, education, facilities, playing children, culture and commerce.
- The public domain concept was used in two ways: as carrier of neighbourhood pride and as 'social real estate', a space in which community life takes place.



2. Structure Plan 'Mozaïekstad Amsterdam Oost' (Mosaic Town Amsterdam East)

- The foundation underneath this long term spatial vision was that we regarded urbanity as a combination of cityscapes and urban culture.
- In this vision, the concept of public domain carries the cityscapes: The built environment is, after all, mostly perceived from public spaces. But public domain can also be seen as the domain of urban culture. In our structure plan, therefore, the local administration has a responsibility to invest in urban culture.



3. Forbidden Fruits of Urban Exploration

- A new generation of 'urban dads and mums' is on the rise. They will have to start standing up for themselves, as urban planners tend to overlook their existence. While cities are racking their brains to find ways of keeping middle- to high-income households within their walls, they are missing out on this

significant opportunity. With a group of artists, therefore, we have developed a prize-winning concept for child-friendly cities: The Forbidden Fruits of Urban Exploration.

- The core of this concept is to treat the urban public domain as a learning environment for children. Elements which are already there are approached as learning tools. One designer, for example, developed the musical fence: a fence around a school yard with rails of different diameters. Children always trail their hands along these fences. Now, they will here a song as they do so.



4. *New Living Veenendaal*

- For this newly built area of 3500 units, the central question was: how do we build a flexible neighbourhood? How do we ensure that the neighbourhood will adjust itself easily to new demands, even 30 years from now?
- We developed a new concept for flexible apartments and facility buildings, which is currently being applied. However, flexibility should not result in chaos. For that, the public domain is crucial. The more flexible and varied the buildings, the more important it is that the public domain carries coherence. Public space as backbone to the neighbourhood.

5. *Maintenance Vision Port of Rotterdam*

- An intriguing project: writing a management vision paper for 40 kilometres of public domain in one of the largest ports in the world. The Port of Rotterdam wanted a policy based on long term trends and on a more holistic vision.
- In this project, the public domain is seen as value creator for the long term. This is done with the principles of Value Driven Maintenance, and Asset Lifecycle Management.

No matter how widely varied, all of these projects have in common that we keep looking for interaction between hardware – the design – and software – the use, or rather: life.

The Cultural Coalition for the Stadionplein

Now I would like to go into a project which I am leading at the moment: the new Stadionplein in Amsterdam. Situated in the South of the city, just inside the ring-road, on the edge of Berlage's world-famous 1930 Plan Zuid (Plan South) and opposite the Olympic Stadium. A special assignment, for it is not everyday one gets the chance to add a large new recreational square to a city like Amsterdam.

Your city, London, is about to host the Olympic Games for the third time. The Netherlands had that honour only once, in Amsterdam in 1928. They were good Games, though nothing like the Games of today. As Prometheus stole fire from the gods, so it was the people who brought the Games to Amsterdam: The rather Christian, Calvinist government regarded sports as sinful. The reason the Games could be held anyway, was that the Dutch People raised the funds for it themselves.

The Games were the reason the Stadionplein was built: from the very beginning, it served as a huge parking-lot, where the cars of spectators were parked. Basically, the square has retained that function ever since.



De Stadium plane

Though it is called a square, 'plein' in Dutch, it hardly merits the title. For decades, it was horribly neglected. At the moment, it is an empty, windy plane, covered in plates of concrete. Used for parking, and even that sparingly. The Stadionplein is best known for its two snack-bars which attract people from afar. On Saturdays, a dwindling market is held. The stadium, too, was deteriorating, the beautiful construction hidden behind a crumbling concrete wall. Like Prometheus, hanging from the Caucasus.

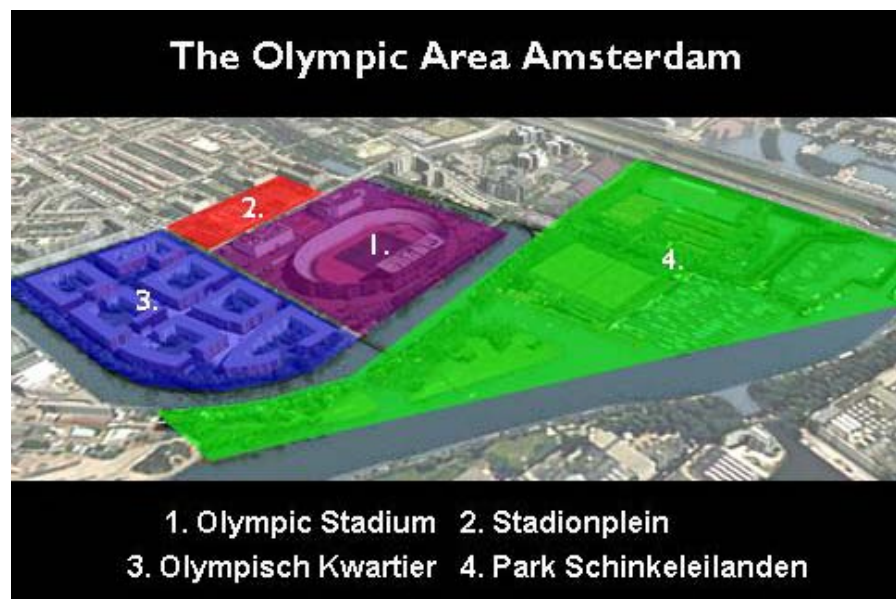


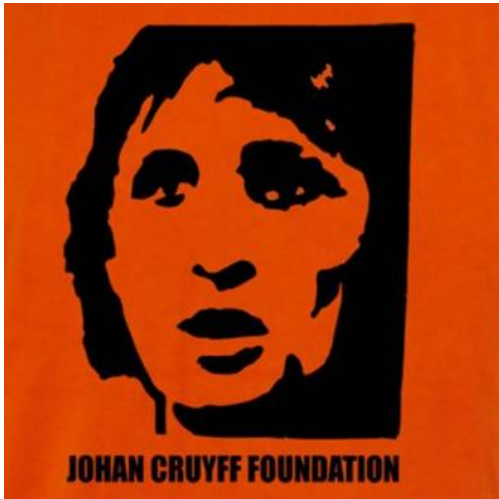
A new area arises

The Stadionplein, then, is in a sad state. But we're about to change that. The surroundings have already undergone a thorough facelift. The Stadionplein is one of the four components which make up the Olympic Area.

The Olympic Stadium came within an inch of destruction ten years ago. But the beautiful

construction from 1928 was saved and renovated. It now houses, among others, an increasing number of 'Olympic' institutions. Examples are the Johan Cruyff Foundation, the Olympic Experience and the Richard Krajicek Foundation. Major events like the Amsterdam Marathon and the Dutch Athletic Championships take place in the Stadium. Its surroundings are being renovated and the area is becoming a venue for major Amsterdam events.





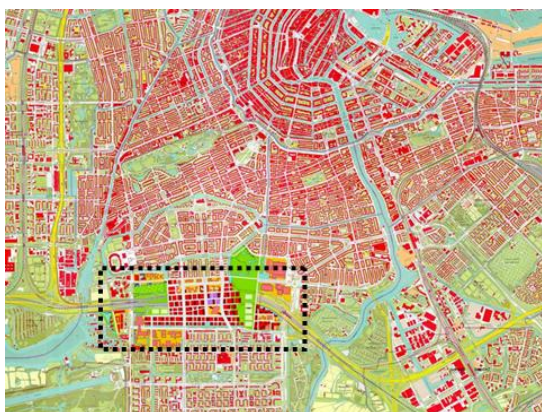
In recent years, an entire new neighbourhood was built adjoining the Stadium. With almost one thousand housing units, the Olympic Quarter is the largest project within the Amsterdam Ring-Road. A mix of luxury and subsidised housing, all built in a new Berlage Style. High standard architecture by prominent Dutch architects as well as large investments in integrated art.



Behind the Stadium, the Schinkeleilanden Park is about to be developed into a recreational area for residents of surrounding neighbourhoods, and will also serve as a link between the Vondelpark and the Amsterdamse Bos (Amsterdam Forest); a large green recreational zone right in the middle of Amsterdam.

Different position in Amsterdam

The surroundings, too are changing. Just ten years ago, this was one of Amsterdam's frayed edges. Outside the Ring-Road was a green, extensive area with Sports Fields and community gardens. This has changed. The ING headquarters were built and the strip to neighbouring Amstelveen was developed. Over the coming decades, Amsterdam will build its new city centre here, the Zuidas (Southern Axis). This area, right next to Schiphol will house the headquarters of everything to do with Legal and Finance in The Netherlands. It will also contain extensive housing and a train station for the high velocity train. A total of 2 million square metres of real estate in this new, urban centre.



Many opportunities then for the Stadionplein, but at the same time not an easy task. The Square is right beside an extremely busy traffic artery. Cultural heritage offers many opportunities, but also leads to a multiplicity of conflicting opinions on what should and shouldn't be done here. The neighbourhood is sceptical, due to all the plans that weren't realised in the past.

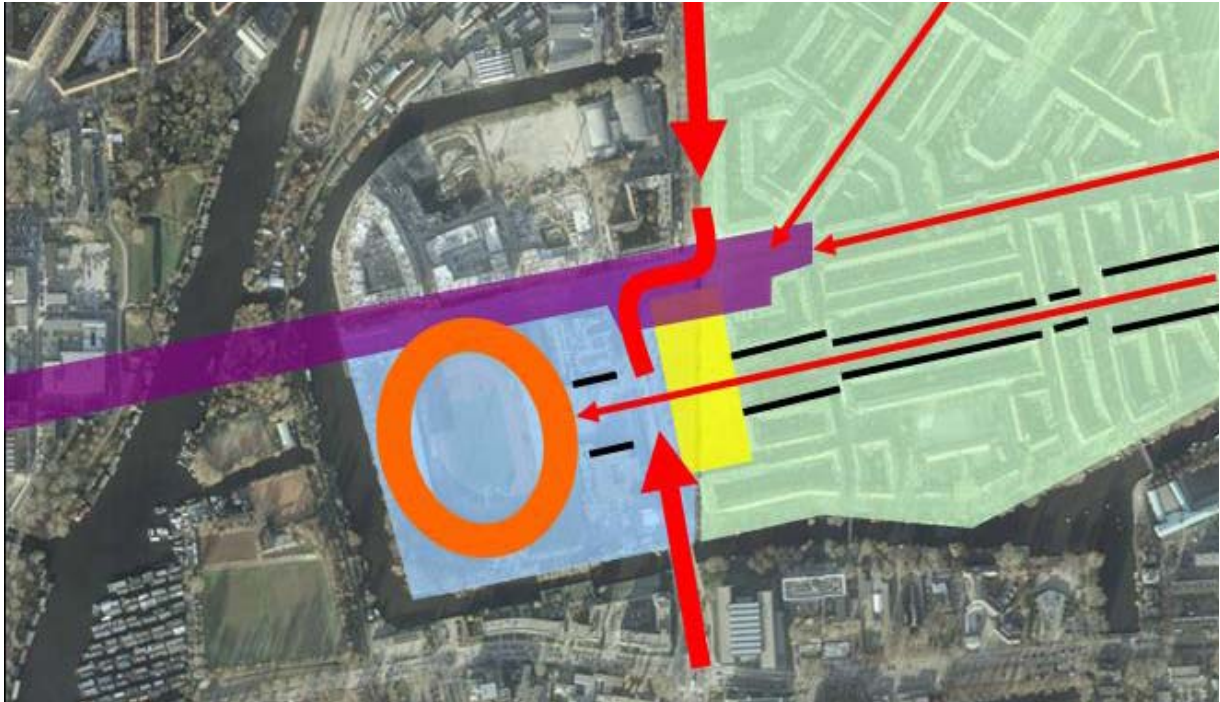
Programme

Our goal is, to get all the cars underground. A new building on the square will shield off the open space, with social facilities, shops, restaurants, cafés and terraces in the ground floor level of the building, and housing above it. The square itself will be an attractive pedestrian recreational zone with an overall green character. Booths or pavilions are possible on the square, allowing for additional programming.



Strategy: attracting high quality

Faster, higher, stronger. It is the Olympic motto. We are now about to acquire a designer for the Stadionplein. Our strategy is aimed at attracting the highest possible quality to this location. The first step will be an urban architectural draft. In this draft, we will consciously go beyond the square itself. The analysis will be directed at the surrounding cityscape and its position within the city. That will be the starting point for a concept of the square? How do we create a link to the Stadium? How do we solve the traffic artery? What will it mean to enter the city through here? How will the square function in the optical axis from the adjoining neighbourhood? All of these questions will need to be answered. The cityscape will direct the design, the square design will direct the building programme. And not the other way around.



What makes a square successful?

Much more can be said about the design, and also about the spatial secrets of creating a good square. About how The Netherlands have a poor tradition of good recreational squares. About the importance of good squares to a city: can you imagine a city without squares? About the constantly changing role of squares over the past centuries. About the walls forming a square, and the right mix of functions. About the people-attracting poles at either end of a square. (About the five square typologies by Paul Zucker of the six types by Gehl and Gemzoe. About a traditional versus a modernistic approach to design.) I'm sure I could speak about these topics for hours. But it does indicate how complex it is, to create a good square.

Again, one of the key secrets is the relationship between hardware and software. More than 110 years ago, Camilo Sitte worried that the square might stop being a lively public meeting place. Two recent innovations of the time caused his concern: the introduction of waterworks and of newspapers. Newspapers meant the end of town criers, waterworks rendered the town pump obsolete. Ever since, stacks of pessimistic publications on the future of squares have appeared, but some realistic ones as well. I myself belong to the latter 'school'. Of course it's true that we've retreated more and more into our homes and cars. Of course public life is fragmented by shopping malls, airports and the internet. But at the same time it is now possible to create car-free squares while a new terrace trend is fed by the rise of singles and the creative class. Things do change, but not necessarily for the worse.



Four new city venues

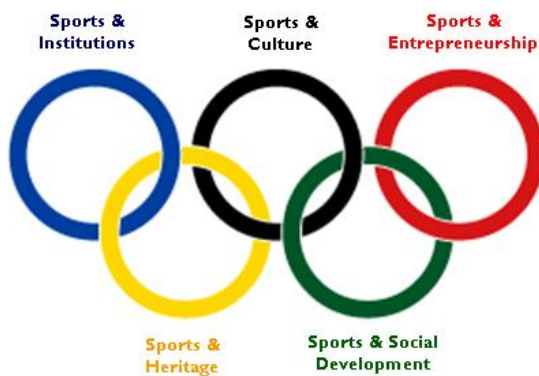
But what does all this mean for the Olympic Area and the Stadionplein? We are in fact adding four new venues to the city: the Schinkeleilanden Park, the Stadium itself, the terrain surrounding the Stadium and finally the Stadionplein. The question we had to ask ourselves was: what destination will all these new venues get? For there is hardly anything sadder than a venue which lies empty in all its beauty.



Alongside the hardware project, therefore, we have started up a software project for the Olympic Area. We don't believe we can impose a square's programming artificially. But we do believe we can make better use of the initiatives and ideas which people, institutions and companies already have. We can facilitate the interaction between initiatives and attracting new investments to the area.

We have recently conducted interviews with dozens of stakeholders: residents, sports institutes, cultural entrepreneurs, social partners, investors, urban networks, artists, advertising consultants, cultural historians and architectural experts. This has provided us with countless ideas. For example: Forming a youth team for each of the surrounding neighbourhoods and having them compete against each other in various sports, supported by the Johan Cruyff Foundation.

Or having the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra play on the Stadionplein eight days before the 2008 Olympics, by way of a greeting to Beijing – putting the area on the world map at the same time.
Or the idea of forming the ‘Sport Allee Amsterdam’, which will run like a sports corridor through the city.
Or the concept of forming an international network of all the Olympic cities in the world.
All of these plans will help to position the Olympic Area as a distinctive part of the Creative City of Amsterdam. They will each generate projects, small and large, which allows for the first visible results very soon.



We have now divided the overall theme ‘the Olympic Spirit’ into five sub-themes, overlapping each other just as the Olympic rings. In these themes, institutions are linked with each other, and sport is linked with culture, with entrepreneurship, with heritage, with social development. Together with the stakeholders we will write a common Programme Book, and form a common Cultural Coalition for the Olympic Area. They will carry out the activities and make the Coalition grow over the next few years.

All of these ideas about software are interwoven in the hardware. For within the design, there needs to be space for all of these activities. Room for the Coalition to grow over the coming decades, to take new, unexpected turns. This interactive process inspires enthusiasm in residents and institutions, rather than defensive reactions to plans made by a government as a desk job plan.

I would not, of course, pretend to compare myself to Hercules. The Cultural Coalition, however, in which the neighbourhood, institutions and urban networks find each other, may take that part. Together, they will unchain Prometheus and give him back his freedom. I hope the Olympic flame will continue to burn here for a long time and that, come July 2012, The Coalition will be able to send greetings to London in its turn.



Amsterdam, May 2006

About Hans Karssenbergh

Hans Karssenbergh is founder, director and senior advisor for Stipo Consult. Stipo is an Amsterdam based consultancy for people, place, strategy and innovation. The University of Amsterdam developed Stipo-method is the basis for innovative and creative projects, workshops, lectures and trainings. Hans Karssenbergh has experience in leading a great variety of projects for local governments, housing corporations, private sector parties, residents organisations, regional bodies, provinces and international exchange networks. More information on projects, concepts and methods at www.stipo.nl.



Recent examples include the European project for urban regeneration ReUrbA2 (www.reurba.org); creation of the Cultural Coalition for the Amsterdam Olympic Area and creation of the new Stadion square for Amsterdam; the award winning regeneration project Kultuurstraat in Enschede Zuid for combined social, cultural and physical development..

Hans Karssenbergh is also founder, joint administrator and contributor to ErasmusPC, the international network for cities and culture, see www.erasmuspc.com.

Stipo Consult

Antillenstraat 43
1058 GZ Amsterdam
The Netherlands
+ 31 20 4233 690
hkarssenbergh@stipo.nl
www.stipo.nl

This speech was translated by Sophie Koers, Amsterdam, www.praktischidealisme.nl