

Premio Internazionale Carlo Scarpa per il Giardino

19th edition, 2008

Museumplein of Amsterdam

Amsterdam, Netherlands

Carlo Scarpa Prize
2008
Jury report

The jury of the International Carlo Scarpa Prize for Gardens has decided to dedicate the 2008 award to the Museumplein of Amsterdam, a key open space for the life of the city and for the major cultural institutions that give onto it, an emblem of the radically new approach pursued by the Public Administration at the end of the xx century, designed and coordinated by the landscape expert Sven-Ingvar Andersson.

The project is an excellent example of how a clear idea, skilful coordination and community involvement were able to transform an enormous, traffic-ridden and historically unstructured area into a place which, despite its visible organizational problems, eloquently speaks the language of poise and dignity, a *campo dei musei*, a vast lawn in dialogue with the open sky, freely embracing nature, light, water and trees, the presence of citizens and visitors and even great public gatherings.

The design and management of the transformation of the Museumplein together constitute a masterly example of the art of landscape for our time, directed in this case at showing the stupendous power of simplicity.

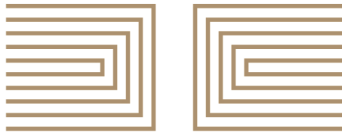
The large catalogue of historic maps of Amsterdam, a particularly rich municipal archive and an extensive bibliography illustrate a hundred and forty years of debate and of failure of the projects devised for the expansion of the city into new areas just outside the walls, in the anomalous triangle between the Vondelpark and the Boerenwetering Canal.

Starting with the plans of Jacobus Gherardus van Niftrik (1866 and 1872), the names attached to the score and more of known and published projects that never got off the ground include those of several important architects and city planners: Petrus Josephus Hubertus Cuypers (1876 and 1891), Hendrick Petrus Berlage (1895-1896), Cornelis van Eesteren (1928 and 1951). The difficulties begin with the size of the open space in question which, despite the building developments and the changes of use, still co-vers around 8 hectares, and the consequent distances, which together set the terms and constraints of a planning task which is extremely difficult to control. Between the ramparts of the xvii century walls and the old southern boundary of the city of Amsterdam lies a distance of over 600 metres, so the Rijksmuseum (1885) is more than 500 metres from the Concertgebouw (1888) indirectly opposite. And since not only the Rijksmuseum, but also the Stedelijk Museum (1894) and the more recent Van Gogh Museum (1973) were conceived with their backs to the common ground, and the concert hall is separated from it by one of the busiest urban thoroughfares, it had gradually become accepted that the already complex spatial and functional relationship of four of the most important and intensively frequented cultural institutions in Europe needed to be redesigned and the buildings' entrances relocated.

And around these original contradictions – which were due to the physical geography of the area and to the stratification of the marks left by the history of failed attempts – other tensions and contradictions were generated by mobility issues and by the consequent demand for areas dedicated to thoroughfares and to parking spaces for individual and public service vehicles for both residents and visitors.

The result was that from the early 1980s there was a succession of area plans designed to rationalize road and rail routes and to sort out some of the unresolved traffic problems.

When the municipal authority of South Amsterdam (*Oud-Zuid*), which is responsible for the area in question, decided at the beginning of the 1990s to respond to various media and professional pressures by undertaking the reorganization-rehabilitation (*herinrichting*) of the Museumplein, it became clear that the difficulty of finding a dignified comprehensive solution by



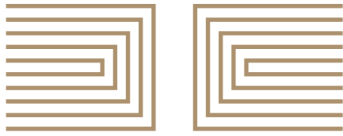
mediating between the various demands, the various specialist technical and planning requirements and the needs of the many stakeholders was insurmountable. In the most recent phase in the history of the Museumplein, which began in February 1992 and concluded in August 1999, the approach adopted by Public Administration appears especially significant. With a transparent procedure based on a combination of experience and decisive action, a consultative committee composed of three eminent Dutch experts – the urban planner Rein Geurtsen, the landscape designer Alle Hoeser and the architect Maarten Kloos – coordinated by municipal councillor Walter Etty, was given the task of outlining the nature of the appointment needing to be made and at the same time of seeking an appropriate figure to fill it.

Still more noteworthy, and to some extent surprising, is the fact that the figure they proposed was a landscape designer, albeit one with long and extensive experience, including the planning of public squares in large cities.

The logic and the process followed in reaching the decision to propose the Scandinavian landscape designer Sven-Ingvar Andersson for the job, with the assistance of the Dutch planner Stefan Gall, highlight the three fundamental parameters governing the choice: the ability to devise solutions with a strong and distinctive identity; the ability to coordinate the various public offices and the scientific, technical and operational specialists involved; the ability to listen and provide constructive responses to the many different needs of both inhabitants and visitors. All three found ample expression during the seven years taken by the radical transformation. The idea and its shapes and dimensions were all incorporated into the Master Plan published in June 1993. Andersson's introduction to the document is marvellously clear and uncluttered, in the long tradition of the modern school of Nordic landscape design and with touching allusion to his teacher Carl Theodor Sørensen in his use of the distinctive vegetation sectors through which the space is organized and its geometry perceived. «The centre of a cyclone is known as its "eye" and this is an area of tranquillity surrounded by the noise and fury of dynamic forces. When one is in the eye of the storm, one feels both the vital energy of the forces unleashed and the soothing calm of silence. Museumplein is the eye of the physical and spiritual cyclone created by the city of Amsterdam. From the outset, it has been my intention to make the void visible and the silence audible in order to enable the creation of an empty receptacle capable of being filled with physical and spiritual vitality, a vitality that will animate it constantly and that may sometimes explode with the force of an overwhelming tide.

The eye, i.e. the empty receptacle, must be simple in shape and must be able to express dignity, because it is through simplicity and dignity that it will be possible to initiate a dialogue between the cultural institutions present on the campus and the sky overhead, between the open space and the air. Neither the inhabitants of the district, nor the representatives of the institutions and their normal users nor the politicians suggested the plan to me; they did, however, provide me with a lot of information. I listened to their needs, their dreams and their expectations and in thinking them through I have used my imagination in seeking a result that has a simple dignity». These words of Sven-Ingvar Andersson offer the clearest of insights into his guiding concept. The consultations and the discussions that followed took place in the light of the 1993 Master Plan which, with small amendments, was approved by South Amsterdam City Council in September 1995 and in the subsequent four years provided the unifying framework for the many far-reaching project actions.

The Museumplein is still the site of ongoing work – the renovation of the Rijksmuseum, which won't finish until 2013, the new cycle lanes that are being laid and, in particular, the complicated extension and new entrance for the Stedelijk Museum. Also in view of the city's explicit ambitions to be a centre of excellence in the metropolitan geography of Europe, Amsterdam's *campo dei musei* is once again at the centre of the attention of the Public Administration, of those in charge of museums, of the Dutch scientific community and of the area's inhabitants. Such attention provides an opportunity to return to the unfulfilled aspects of the project, in particular as regards the layout and the role of the Concertgebouw Square in the spatial and functional system of the Museumplein and the choice of the point where automobiles enter and emerge from the underground car park. Such attention is necessary too because a great open urban space designed to tolerate any and every possible use has a daily need of loving attention and actions capable of restoring the light line in accordance with the original idea, of maintaining the quality of the lawn and renewing the vegetation; rules to remove the decorative features that tend to accumulate there; decisions to ensure continuation of the work undertaken.



The jury therefore makes a heartfelt appeal to those who are responsible for the Museumplein, confident that they will apply the care, attention and rules required to ensure the safeguarding of the distinctive characteristics of its form and its vital force and to enhance the impact of its universal message of noble simplicity and quiet greatness.