



# Amateurism, the fresh maker



Amateurism is everywhere. Just look at last week's headlines. The Rijksmuseum will now not open until 2013—seven years later than planned and likely €88 million over the currently available budget. Meanwhile, the global media continues to pump up the impending release of an anti-Muslim movie being made by a local amateur film-maker.

But amateurism can also be a good thing: as inspiration for 'professionals' and a potential means to quirk up and give identity to urban spaces.

Since January, the Architecture Academy on Waterloooplein has been under the spell of amateurism. This year's artist-in-residence, Erik Kessels, creative director of the communications agency KesselsKramer, has been celebrating amateurism by organising workshops, street actions and an exhibition. There are also weekly lectures that have included the likes of Julian Germain, who has worked with Brazilian street children to create huge walls of photography, and Marti Guixe, a 'product designer who hates objects'. This Thursday, Dori Hadar, a criminal investigator and junk collector from Washington DC, will talk about discovering the home-made 50-album oeuvre, all made of cardboard, of imaginary soul superstar Minging Mike.

KesselsKramer has been behind some of the quirkier ad campaigns of the last decade, such as the one that promoted Hans Brinker Budget Hotel with, 'It Can't Get Any Worse. But We'll Do Our Best'. But KesselsKramer has also produced the film *The Other Final* that documented the match between Bhutan and Montserrat, the two lowest ranking football teams in the world, and published several books on amateur photography.

In the introduction to the forthcoming book *Amateurism* due out later this month, Kessels writes: 'In Wikipedia (one of the greatest non-professional projects ever) we see the word [amateur] has a French root, meaning "love of". And that is the crux for me. Amateurs have a passion for what they do that is mostly unaffected by the need for recognition (financial or otherwise). It is a cliché, but the work is its own reward. Their enthusiasm results in styles and ways of seeing usually absent in the creations of their professional peers.'

#### Applied amateurism

Martijn Al, working as a professional landscape architect for CH&Partners in Den Haag while completing his Masters at the academy, reassures me that no one in his firm has ever considered approaching the building of foundations in an amateuristic way. While participating in the week-long Amateurism Workshop in January, Al's own project had him working with Design Politie and architect Duzan Doepel to make a typographic, yet amateuristic, political intervention in the city.

'Since it had to be political, I was inspired by the fact that the Netherlands is one of the countries with the least amount of private places in the world—with the most cameras and the most tapped phone calls, etcetera. I started to see the cameras everywhere: in train stations, by bank machines and on squares and streets. And I learned that there were

only two rules: the recorded images could not be made public, and these cameras had to be visible. But what's visible? People just don't notice them. So we made a cardboard cut-out that said 'Watch Your Step', bought some rice at the Chinese supermarket on Nieuwmarkt and then dumped the rice into the cut-out on the street in front of the store's camera.' The results were an elegant way of drawing attention to the many city cameras recording our every move. (Of course, a professional activist would have just covered the lens with spray paint.)

And Al was inspired: 'Usually as

Herengracht between Weesperstraat and the Amstel. "Things are changing. Ten or fifteen years ago, the trend was that public spaces should be as empty as possible so they can be used in as many ways as possible. Now the trend is to green things up.'

Al laughs as he points out an old *Oma* bicycle pimped up with plastic vines and flowers. 'And there are many different ways you can green things up!'

'Landscape architects have, in a way, already applied amateurism into common practice. We are not independent artists. We have to talk to the clients and the peo-

## Professional architects, landscape architects and urban designers go 'amateur'. Can it save our city from being scrubbed to death? Two new experts take us to the streets to look for inspirational amateurism in our own backyard.

BY STEVE KORVER



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architects, we are just busy with paper and plans and then the building companies do the actual work. Now we were doing something in *practice*.'

But besides enriching the streetscape temporarily, can applied amateurism help in stemming the continued trend of *vertrutting*—frumpification—in Amsterdam? 'This city is indeed turning more and more into an open air museum, but on the other hand, it's the country's calling card. So there is a positive side to it,' says Al, who lives in Haarlem.

'But you do lose a sense of identity,' he adds, as we take a stroll along Nieuwe

ple who are going to be using these spaces. And as "amateurs", these users are a very valuable resource. If you notice that a lot of residents already have their own tiny gardens, you can fit that into the planning.'

And indeed, as we reach the Amstel, tiny allotments are currently being built into the sidewalks in front of the houses. As we reach the bridge, Al also points out a houseboat with a floating wild garden providing contrast to the newly laid cobblestone. It's nice, green and chaotic, adding amateuristic life to some highly professional surroundings.

#### Prinseneiland, amateur paradise?

Lada Hršak is a professional architect who has done everything from redesigning an Amsterdam houseboat to working on the heralded new Dutch embassy in Addis Abeba, Ethiopia. She's also employed as a teacher of design and concepts at the academy and took part in the workshop. She was paired up with stylist Patrick Moonen to work out amateur concepts in fashion, resulting in feather boas made from Albert Heijn plastic bags and suits made from financial papers.

'The workshops were a piss-take in a way,' says Hršak, 'but a lot of fun. More rude and funny than cynical. And in Kessels-Kramer's work you see the influence of amateurism from day one. In fact, the rest of Dutch design has this same bottom-up approach. That's why it's so renowned for being fresh and witty. But you still need a professional to "clean it up".'

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She thinks some architectural 'masterpieces' have been produced through amateur efforts, such as a palace of stone built by French postman, Ferdinand Cheval (1836-1924), who spent 33 years building his 'ideal palace' from rocks that he collected while doing his mail route.

We are walking around Prinseneiland, While the beautiful island has undergone a lot of new development, it still hasn't lost its funky vibe, though the same cannot be said for large sections of the neighbouring Jordaan.

'Why this area works is because of the diversity of styles,' Hršak says. 'Not everything is of one grain. Of course all the houseboats help. And while there are modern buildings now here, you also have murals, the children's farm, and this is just beautiful of course.'

She has led me to a ground floor apartment across from cafe Blaauw Hoofd on Blokmakerstraat. The front porch has a double car seat, two birch branch lamps and the background is a large print of Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Early Delights*. Could this garden be translated on a larger scale elsewhere?

'I'll have to get back to you on that one,' she laughs. 'Now the emphasis is too much on building at high speed and achieving the most square meters. It's all about *haalbaarheid* [practicality]. And if you leave space for unclarity—where the users can actually fill it themselves—that makes developers nervous. The design challenge is to generate development and make buildings good enough to bear imperfections. But on a small scale, such as here, it's still possible.'

'And remember, it's about allowing freshness. It doesn't mean we should cover our buildings and cities with all kinds of junk.'

Too bad. There's goes the idea of suggesting the immediate reopening of the Rijksmuseum as it now is, and just covering it with garden gnomes. **W**

*Amateurism, Academy of Architecture, Waterloooplein 211 (Mon-Thu, 10.00-17.00, Fri 10-18.00), until 20 March 2008. Upcoming lectures (20.00): 6 March, Dori Hadar (www.mingeringmike.com); 13 March, Robin Rimbaud (www.scanner-dot.com); 20 March, Jay Rosenblatt (www.jayrosenblattfilms.com).*