

"Uitzicht op!"

In Species of Spaces Georges Perec writes, "This is how space begins, with words only, signs traced on the blank page."

This describes what one might have expected when traveling to IJburg in July 2006. At that time IJburg was no longer a blank page, there were already too many traces there. A strange feeling accompanied us when we got off Tram 26 at the final stop, 'IJburglaan', before it turned around in a loop \in the sand\ . The buildings along IJburglaan looked artificial, barely finished, not yet filled with life, and our first thought was: What are we doing here? We entered Block 35 and there it was: The Blue House, an intensely blue building standing out in a courtyard location. The blue color seemed as if it were glued to the building, which in turn seemed to be screaming out to be different, wanting to be "something better" we supposed, still strangely placed in this panopticon-like situation. Foucault immediately came to mind, but the question remained: who observes whom here? The Blue House was conceived as a villa, the luxury version in a "model block" providing a range of housing types for various social groups and needs: spacious apartments, duplexes, row houses, and social housing units. As it often happens, that which is intended "for our best" fails its promise. As it turned out, in spite of the planners' intentions, the villa proved to be unpopular in such architectural and social surrounding, with both residents and future owners. Heavy curtains running along the corner windows of the Blue House, created a sense of fallen communication and were read as a symbol for the building's problematic nature within the housing block.

The social housing units could be easily identified. What was supposed to be a garden was in fact a concrete platform, since these buildings were located above the parking garage. But already, these cement gardens had received a striking atypical counterpart: a prospering, luxurious vegetable garden showing a wide diversity of fruits and crop, a visual delight creating desire and an immediate urge to touch the plants - a very haptic experience from the first moment. This was the community garden initiated by Rudy Luytjers (an art historian and landscape architect) for The Blue House. At the garden doors flung open, local Moroccan kids wandered around examining the fruits which were on the verge of ripening. Later Rudy told us that most of these kids had never seen a garden strawberry growing and that for them it was a unique and rewarding experience to volunteer and take care of a garden.

Community gardens have always proved to be successful concepts as social art projects. Thus, one could state that this was nothing "special", but rather an obvious possibility to start inhabiting a space with the aid of a community friendly art project. Still, it was special in this new place, which at the time was not yet a developed residential area, but still a rather vast desert. Rudy Luytjers' garden prospered and created a wilderness which seemed to be unplanned, despite its careful cultivation. With it, in an aesthetic aspect, the element of the intuitive, spontaneous came into play at The Blue House.

When walking upstairs to our new, temporary apartment on 2nd floor, Paul (who had arrived earlier) explained that "we were lucky", because it seemed that the construction workers would be on vacation pretty soon. While talking on the phone we could hear various rhythms provided by hammer drills and other machinery. There were

certain regular breaks, but apart from these breaks the noise of the drills became the unwanted, dominant companion of IJburg's new residents. We walked up to the roof top terrace of the house and enjoyed the view over IJmeer for the first time. It was stunning: a panorama of countless different cranes that marked the current construction sites, the sand and the sea in the distance. One panoramic view stood out: especially "framed" on a roof terrace in front of the Blue House, pointing at this quality in IJburg – the view to the IJmeer.

And then, looking around from the terrace, we noticed: colonies of spiders. They were everywhere, on the hand rails, around the window frames, on the grid above us, hanging, climbing, weaving, walking, busy with conquering their new territory in an unimaginable speed. These unwanted and unplanned inhabitants were the signifier for this new territory, a signifier of something being in process but also out of balance.

We started to take walks. We walked towards the physical edges of the island, experiencing the development's margins: isolated bridges arising and ending in the sand, strangely at loss of function as there was, no water underneath... yet.

This abundance of a void, absence of history, was a fascinating new experience for us. Coming from Austria, a country loaded with historical heritage and preservation regulation, we were used to endless public debates that accompany the public discussion on whether (and due to which conditions) contemporary architecture is tolerable. When observing IJburg, it seemed that all imaginable projections could find a place here, but this would require empty spaces to be preserved, as part of the master plan –especially in regard to the desert and its potential. We somehow imagined the "invisible city" in a sense of a contemporary critical and literary exploration of Italo Calvino's book from 1972 under the same title.

Could IJburg serve as inspiration for one more invisible city as imagined by Italo Calvino? How would he describe IJburg? Would this narrative possibly infiltrate IJburg's planning process and the desire for a 'real' community life? At this point, in 2006, there was still space to imagine and develop a narrative for this new habitat. At certain points construction nets stuck out of the newly modeled sandy ground, and – seemingly from nowhere – high-street lamp posts arose along an already asphalted bridge that ascended from the sand with a road sign reading "Amsterdam". Also, a bridge manifested itself connecting IJburg with a yet unforeseen place...

The idea of living on an island evokes a feeling of longing and desire for that which is absent in everyday life. Island is a synonym for the other, the escape, the non-everyday, the irregular. However, since on IJburg this will be the everyday situation, how can the non-everyday be cultivated around every next corner? Is this a question that concerned developers and urban planners when they sketched out the urban design and the master plan for IJburg?

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On another walk, we followed the signs from the house to Blijburg Beach and experienced one of this new island's qualities: dusk falling upon the beach, that was now almost empty. The beach was the attraction for people from Amsterdam, a hip pseudo-post-hippy place, run successfully and as well-calculated business by a local politician's daughter.

On Saturday morning Nicoline Koek (an art historian and self-thought florist, who had installed a flower shop in the front of The Blue House) arrived and set out her stalls,



arranging the flowers generously in large vases. She told us that her greatest dream was to start up a flower shop on IJburg, but that there were still no available licenses for individual stores, since only one shopping center governed by Albert Heijn, and thus no competition, was tolerated.

The following Thursday a sign was placed outside The Blue House announcing the start of the "Children's Library" an idea initiated by Marthe van Eerdt (an IJburg resident), open once a week. Bookshelves were set up on the ground floor of the Blue House, its communal space, and the room quickly filled with kids from the neighborhood. The library, set up and functioning once a week, provided a much needed space for interaction between children and their parents and the house as a new social contact point.

On one of the next evenings a public dinner organized and hosted by The Blue House took place. Benches and tables were set in front of the house, and for the first time the common space that in Block 35 - and the only such area in this block that could be considered public space in principle - changed from a large unused and vague area, (where occasionally someone would pass through in the evening or morning; one hardly ever saw kids playing here), into a space that had social function and was in fact both, public and private at the same time, something like an urban living-room. And this experience provided a certain respite for the 5.000 residents of IJburg in 2006: until this moment the only social space on the island was a single café and not even a single restaurant on the island.

Every day of our first visit we learned more about the lacking of infrastructure on the island and not only in terms of its all-encompassing totality we had been aware of from the master plan (which we experienced on a one-to-one basis). At that time, virtually every event of The Blue House was a response to the fact of lack of social interaction on the island. It was the lack of public spaces and social occasions for people to meet and interact (apart from the meeting at the shopping center and the café), that inspired ideas for events that would transform IJburg into a lively, future-orientated urban area as it had been originally intended.

Coming from a mountainous area, we thought that maybe the Dutch mentality

Since there was already an abundance of project initiatives of diverse orientations and goals, we decided not to add yet another project to The Blue House. Rather than that we developed a concept to implement most of the already existing projects of other residents of The Blue House into a permanent structure, enlarged by the site-specific qualities of IJburg. We called it The Blue Block.

By developing this fictional narrative of the Blue Block based on a tangible reality of the experiences of The Blue House we wanted to transfer the Blue House in its temporality to a level of lasting (permanent) conviction and sustainability (the major part of infrastructure had been planned for the next island which might never be built). With this project, transparadiso wanted to try to follow up on this promise together with the Blue House and explore how "direct urbanism" can extend "classical urban planning methods" and take on new forms of programmatic substantiation. The methods and procedures of developers and the block structure would be analyzed alongside the master plan and would be confronted with the model of the "Blue Block".

This meant to implement a new block, i.e. to concentrate on the question of how to transfer the temporary qualities of the projects of The Blue House (ranging from social services, sociological investigations to art projects) into permanent qualities of the new islands, offering a haptic and aesthetically visible experience which would counteract and create an addition to the mainstreamed aesthetic of IJburg. We wanted to set an example for how to rupture this circle of recent urban practices where artists are involved in urban development for very specific reasons and expectations from the various stakeholders - but just for a limited amount of time, thus allowing construction business, developer interests, etc, to continue their plans as before the artists interventions. Therefore, the goal was to continue The Blue House project as Blue Block beyond the period of 5 years that had been (self)appointed. We imagined the Blue Block as the ideal place to experiment sustainability of temporal ideas. So we envisioned collective terraces in The Blue Block (offering a view towards the sea) alongside other aspects offered by "Pump up the Blue" by Hervé Paraponaris, Nicoline's flower shop being transformed into the imaginative "Hanging Gardens of Semiramis", the informal playgrounds by the architectural duo m7red, the collective farming soil (e.g. a cultivated sand hill) by Rudy Luijters, while also exploring other potentials deriving from necessities of the context of IJburg such as the idea of creating a birds' nesting place fighting the spiders.

With The Blue Block we aimed at integrating all temporary services and qualities generated by the residents/ artists of the Blue House and transforming them - alongside the experiences gathered throughout the project - into permanent qualities of a sample block. We wanted to add only one further aspect which we anticipated to become vital within the next two years: the foreseen loss of the view to the lake. When we came to IJburg for the first time in July 2006, we were confronted with the fact that the view was limited to only 2 years, or until the next block would be built right in front of the first one, as the construction sites developed from the center to the fringes.

may altogether have a different attitude towards the significance of having a view. Whereas Austrians work their entire life to build their desired homes and continuously postpone satisfaction that follows, people in IJburg are used to moving, to living with short-term fulfillments. They possibly have a different conception of "property", ownership and territory. During the process of working on the project and through conversations with Marianne Maasland we learned, however, that divorce rates were increasing, and thus started to make assumptions... Could this trend be related to high and maybe irredeemable expectations that rely on new architecture and new territory as a synonym for a happy life (as it is a general marketing strategy for new city quarters like IJburg)?

December 2006

A first draft of the Blue Block served as basis for a discussion which should unfold with the other residents of the Blue House, the stakeholders etc. The first meeting was organized by Jeanne van Heeswijk and Irene den Hartoog: a dinner with other residents and the neighbors of the Blue House. Together with Dennis Kaspori we had meetings with planners and stakeholders of IJburg, like the director of Waterstaad2, one of the urban planners of IJburg, etc. - After these meetings we realized that most of the blocks had already been planned and that it would be very hard to develop such a project from a distance, since it would require a lot of negotiations in a longer-term process.

Dutch housing has served as a role model all around Europe, and we therefore wanted

to explore some of the examples and research the problems that had shown over time and see the “upgrading” in order to understand more about how IJburg had been conceived and what had possibly been learned from other examples.

We visited Almere and witnessed its “regeneration” by OMA. The intervals between the construction of a new urban quarter and its regeneration are getting increasingly shorter; they in fact almost blend into each another. Almere was built from 1975 onwards; the refurbishing resp. completion of public space on a high level started with “Almere Poort” in 2000.

Together with Jeanne and Yane Calovski we went to Leidsche Rijn to see “Beyond”, a very ambitious long-term public art project for a new city quarter in Utrecht that will become the home of some 80.000 inhabitants. Passing by a street market with Christmas trees, we decided to buy one for The Blue House, even if none of us would be there for Christmas. We somehow wanted to create a moment for our shared experience at The Blue House, a symbol for our belonging there and we thought, what could be a stronger symbol than a Christmas tree?

2007

In Spring 2007 Jeanne and Dennis told us about a temporary hotel project. We liked the idea and suggested to combine it with our project dealing with the loss of the view, and to add a special tool for regaining a view. The idea of the Periscope Elevator was born.

Summer 2007

The Blue Block was announced and the Periscope Elevator was developed further as an independent object that could be connected to the Hotel Out of the Blue and considered part of the Blue Block as a next step.

We found an old periscope from WWI in the depths of family treasures. A manual (in German and Hungarian) explaining how to use it for looking around corners was enclosed.

The Periscope Elevator is based on the simple optical principles of a periscope, using the height of the elevator as optical feature: the lower mirror is fixed to the rising platform / cabin and the upper mirror is attached to the building. Traveling up and approaching the upper mirror would mean that the view through the periscope would eventually collapse with the actual view when having reached the upper point. We worked on several versions: the Periscope Elevator as traveling platform which could be located in different sites on IJburg, or by using a construction site elevator attached to a building, possibly to the Hotel Out of the Blue.

Then the Hotel Out of the Blue was postponed to 2009, since the construction sites were either finished or not yet brought up to a state of structural work that could be used. So we decided to develop the Periscope Elevator as independent urban tool for IJburg and to offer the view towards the sea from various points of the island.

2008

The Periscope Elevator was developed further, but then all kinds of obstacles came into discussion, like the wind force and enforced legal regulations to obtain a permit. The

high costs for renting a rising platform did not seem to be appropriate or justifiable for a single event either.

August 2008

We were looking for a new option, considering installing the periscope in a fixed place. When we arrived at The Blue House in August 2008, we were confronted with what we had anticipated since the beginning: the view had disappeared! The viewing-frame (meant for framing an open and unlimited view towards the sea) on the roof terrace on Maria-Austria-Straat 700b showed a new construction site in front of the terrace – we realized this would be a perfect site for the periscope!



An intense process searching a location and including negotiations for obtaining permits was started by Irene, and Yasser Ballemaans, together with Ruid from All Right Service, was in the middle of producing the periscope.

As it turned out, the Blue House was in contact with some of the owners of the terrace (our preferred location), Anjo and Aline Terpstra from Timon Woongroep. Irene proposed and explained the project to them, and with her openness and hospitality that she had shown to all of us throughout the whole process of inhabiting and working with The Blue House, she managed to convince them to collaborate on realizing the project. It seemed like a miracle, that after all these efforts dealing with planners, developers etc., the private initiative, personal engagement and individual interest actually made it possible to realize something all of us had been working on very hard for more than two years.





2009

February 2009

The big moment happened on February 6th: The periscope was installed in Maria-Austria-Straat 700b, in Block 35 - the block of the Blue House - on a private roof terrace, and with the help of Yasser and Ruid and many other helping hands. The installation took place together with the opening of the Bouwkeet of the Stedelijk Museum. The owners Anjo and Aline Terpstra's generous offer was to open up their private house to welcome the public every Friday and Saturday to take a view through the periscope.

Looking through the periscope opened up a new dimension: One could see the IJmeer again with ships passing by, as if the new wall right in front of the terrace had dissolved into the mist of the sea. And even though we had anticipated how it would feel to have a view unfolding in front of one's eyes again, we could not know what it would actually mean. There it was: this emotional experience went beyond overcoming the factuality of regaining a function. The periscope was equipped with a binocular, which emphasized the perception of already being at sea, looking into the far distance, and exploring new shores of unknown territory.



Once one turned away from the periscope, facing the wall again, that was emphasized by the frame on the terrace, one immediately sensed a feeling of disappointment, that one was betrayed of the view. The frame seemed like a helpless leftover of an idea that was cut out of context or that possibly deliberately wanted to neglect the context by the fact that this framed view on IJburg was meant to be a short-time experience. The periscope developed this seductive energy of dragging you back to take another look. The music of De Rotte Herders, who had performed adapted Old Dutch sailor songs, resonated in one's ears.

The periscope was accompanied by a petition for "More View on IJburg". The petition aimed at implementing the "right to have a view" (on which Pim Hazewindus gave a talk as part of the opening ceremony) as a permanent quality to be considered in the further urban planning of Havenisland and the following islands planned on IJburg.



The periscope should come out of its "hidden", private position and claim a public space accessible to all. The wonderful thing about the periscope's location was that it was part of the Blue House's block, as if part of the Blue Block had actually been realized...at least for a period of 3 months.

Epilogue

August 2009

The taxi stopped at an unknown place. At the reception desk of the Hotel Out of the Blue we realized: Now we were guests, deprived of our status of being residents. The temporally limited project was about to time out for us. For the first time we looked at the Blue House from an external point of view, pointing it out to other conference guests as a site of attraction, as something already physically distant from us. Maybe our process of getting acquainted, making friends, feeling at home and then moving out again paralleled the experience of other IJburgers who, for different reasons of unfulfilled expectations, had left behind their new life in IJburg already after a couple of years....

We made our last walks on the island overcrowded by buildings and still lacking people on the streets. Hard floors, asphalt, kids hanging out, no more sand: hard facts. We learned that the first school for black kids only had opened on IJburg. We saw new inhabitants wearing purple shirts and sun-glasses, leaning on their bikes; most of them seemed to have a migrant background. We learned that they are street coaches, to whom kids can turn to to avoid getting in trouble. The construction of the next island (with the infrastructure to come) has been postponed due to the financial crisis, so the first island is being retrofitted, even before it is finished. With regards to social aspects retrofitting is in fact already necessary.

And then, on the last evening, we discovered another group of inhabitants, we actually re-discovered them: At night on the bridges (which were the first signifiers of a future population and settlement in the desert of IJburg) we witnessed a new life that was vivid, intense, full of energy, and very engaged in work. Spiders had regained their territory - now, when the island's construction had almost been completed.



This was surprising, because one might have expected that by then nature and the competing forces had established a new equilibrium – in favor of the dominant interests of the planners of IJburg. Especially at night on IJburg’s bridges the spiders’ bustle created a second life, as if they were operating due to the commands of a film director who had decided to continue with a different story than the one originally written by the developers.

“All utopias are depressing, because they leave no room for chance, for difference, for the “miscellaneous”. Everything has been set in order, and order reigns. Behind every utopia there is always some great taxonomic design: a place for each thing and each thing in its place.”

(Georges Perec: “penser/ classer”, Hachette, 1985)

Epilogue 2010

The periscope has found a new and permanent location at the Kunstfort Fijfhuizen, waiting for new explorations of having “a view”.



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