**THE NASCENT COMMONS OF PLEIN ’40-‘45**

**Change is at the doorstep for the market on Plein ’40-’45 in the borough New West in Amsterdam. While the market is among the busiest in the city, it also faces some serious challenges, such as street litter, a dysfunctional waste disposal system, its image of offering cheap products of bad quality and the decreasing commercial potential of markets in general. In search of answers to deal with these challenges stallholders are organising themselves and working towards self-governance of the resource they all depend on: the square and the market. And we are supporting them. An update on a nascent commons…**

Joachim Meerkerk, researcher and PhD candidate at Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences (AUAS)

**A market full of potential and threats**

A visit to the market on Plein ’40-’45 leaves you with an ambiguous impression. The vibrant atmosphere of a busy market coloured with diversity grows a contagious enthusiasm. While stallholders are praising their merchandise at the top of their voice, men, women and families are rummaging the isles in search for vegetables to eat tonight, a new carpet to decorate their home or a chat about recent events in the neighbourhood. The scents of freshly grained spices are battling for attention with that of fish and ever-appealing snacks likes spring rolls or kebab. Plein ’40-’45: a lively and dynamic urban place.

But at the same time you might feel confronted with more negative aspects of modern urbanisation. The market is dominated by cheap products of poor quality that resemble the way in which these kinds of peripheral areas of todays cities have developed as the conglomeration of the poor. What initially might feel as diversity, could soon be interpreted as a growing monoculture of djellabas, headscarves and Moroccan vendors. And on the market and in a wide area around it you find large amounts of plastic bags knock about and littering public space. Plein ’40-’45: a place in decay for people in need.

**Building with co-creation**

Improving the liveability and economic vitality of the square and its surrounding area is one of the priorities for the district council, as is the socio economic development of the neighbourhoods around it. Aware of the impossibility to realise this from the plotting board with the municipality as the genius puppeteer, and driven by the long term trend in Dutch political and public sphere to make space for forms of participative democracy, investigations to start an experiment with co-creation between community initiatives, social entrepreneurs, SME’s, civil society and third sector organisations, and the local government (borough and municipality) has been underway for more than a year already. LabGov Amsterdam[[1]](#footnote-1), in which AUAS participates through the ABCitiEs project, has been supporting this process to work with a commons approach.

During the past year several projects and initiatives have evolved. Neighbourhood residents, for example, started a coalition under the name *Wij Zijn Plein ’40-’45* (We Are Plein ’40-’45) that organises all kinds of community activities and initiated a lively Facebook page where people discuss ideas and complaints. Another example is the cooperation between the municipality, social entrepreneurs and waste disposal organisations to design a circular economy alternative for the waste and cleaning system for the square and especially the market. These kinds of activities amalgamate into a positive and enthusiastic pioneering sphere around the square and creating its future. Important in this regard is the time and effort put in connecting different activities and stakeholders. Not only does this result in synergy, it is also slowly building a network that could become a community and gives people the (rightful) feeling they are seen, heard and acknowledged.

**The square as a commons: Zero Waste 4045**

As mentioned, litter and waste are two major problems. The use of plastic bags and packaging is exorbitant and a large share of it does not end up at a consumer’s home and bin, but on the street. Also, the market produces an enormous amount of waste each day, mainly cardboard boxes, plastic crates and unsaleable fruits and vegetables. When zooming in on these issues the complexity that constructs them reveals itself: irresponsible behaviour of consumers and stallholders due to ignorance and/or prioritisation, vulnerable businesses and shortage of means for investment in sustainable alternatives, incapability to design tailor-made policies and public services, a history of undelivered promises, misconduct and conflicts, et cetera.

We are teaming up with Redouan Boussaid, area manager Plein ’40-’45 of the Amsterdam municipality, to work towards adequate solutions. He has the task to improve the cleanliness of the public space and develop a fit and functioning waste disposal system. He also has the mandate and freedom to deliver results through an experimental approach. To deal with the complexity of the challenges we aim to apply a form of collaborative governance, and work from the concept of urban commons to concretize this ambition. We started our cooperation from the mutual recognition of Elinor Ostrom’s finding that regulation enforced top-down is less effective and efficient than developed from within the community of stakeholders. (Ostrom 2010) This idea not only resonates with our personal beliefs and ambitions, but is also fuelled by the lacking capacity of the municipality to enforce regulation and the necessity of a behavioural change that is quite likely outside the reach of rules and enforcement.

We define urban commons as the collective management of the square (the shared urban resource) by the community of stakeholders, through the practices and rules that are developed, operated and maintained by that same community. To make this concrete, we are working on self-organising the push back of litter and unnecessary use of plastic, and a new system for waste disposal. In practice we have been frequenting the market to create a close understanding of the current practices of the stallholders and the underlying aspects of the problems, to search for and mobilize the ambition and energy to bring about change amongst stallholders and to stimulate and facilitate the building of a community as the basis of a self-organisation. At the same time interventions and experiments have been implemented to already test out some of the ideas that popped up and to create visibility of the potentiality of our approach. On another territory we have dived into the rules, policies and institutional organisation that forms the context within which the market operates and that already fills in, from a top-down and centralized logic, some of the functions that the self-organisation could take over.

**First lessons: support self-organisation**

Aware of the fact that a self-organisation should and could not be something that is carried by ourselves, but needs to be owned, supported and driven by the community at large, we have retained as much as possible from initiating and directing the community building process and instead dedicated ourselves to bring inspiration, reflection and support to the ideas and activities that stem from the community. Obviously this is a fine line. A crucial question is also if we can or should be part of the community. In our experience, awareness of this dilemma is already good enough as a starting point to work from.

What catches the eye is the surplus of enthusiasm and ideas for change amongst the stallholders and the sense of responsibility regarding themselves as part of the problem. This is accompanied by many complaints directed at the municipality and a reflex to stare at that same institution awaiting solutions to descend on them. By thematising the problem and making it a subject of discussion we see this attitude slowly altering towards a recognition of the necessity and potential of organising themselves and creating alternative solutions. Salient is the need for support, both strategically and operational, because communities like this quite often lack the skills and experience to build a coalition and to constructively position themselves in the process of policy reform, let alone the time that is needed to do all this. Important, thus, is to work on a manner of support that boosts the process and keeps it going, but remains serving to the self-organisation of the community.

**First lessons: create experimental space to deviate from central policies**

The promise of self-organisation loses its value when its practices are not given the chance to actually bring about change. In other words, if and when the ideas and plans of a self-organisation, for example the self-regulation of waste disposal, are overruled by the policies of institutions, in this case the municipality, trust is broken, motivation is gone and the awakening community will soon fall apart. This threat is showing itself on Plein ’40-’45 in the policies for waste disposal that are developed and put in place by the central bureau for markets of the municipality. In the past stallholders on all markets in Amsterdam were responsible themselves for taking care of their waste, but dissatisfied with the way this functioned the market bureau developed a one size fits all policy that prescribes all stallholders to pay a levy, uniform and independent of the actual waste a stallholder does or does not produce, and the municipality to take care of disposal.

This policy doesn’t only seem to fail, it also leaves many opportunities unexploited. The growing sentiment of the policy to have unjust consequences and is not contributing to improvement, is the breeding ground for the ideas and motivation for self-organisation. This self-organisation opens up the possibility to design solutions contextualized to the circumstances and possibilities of each individual market. To create space for this it needs to become possible to deviate from central policies, but in real life this is the moment the restraining effect of a central bureaucratic institution to deal with this complexity comes to the surface. An important lesson, then, is that the ambition of self-organisation needs to be accompanied by a mandate to deviate and experiment on the short term, and a strategy to develop a synergetic relation between local solutions of self-organisations and coordinating central policies on the long term.

**To be continued…**

We are still only in the starting phase of developing the commons of Plein ’40-’45. As a matter of fact, this process is continuous and everlasting. To begin, working on a firm base will demand for a lot of effort and perseverance in the upcoming period. Many questions are still left open and answers need to be discovered in the practice of our experiments. What kind of support and interventions, for example, are needed to build and secure the community? To what extent can or need civil servants or divisions of the municipality be part of the self-organising community? How can co-creation between the self-organisation and other parties such as central institutions or waste disposal organisations come about and be made successful? Does the self-organisation need to be institutionalized and how can it develop, operate and preserve its own regulatory system? Many more questions like these will continue to evolve. We will keep you updated…

1. LabGov (Laboratory for the Governance of the Commons) is an international network of theoretical, empirical and applied research platforms engaged in exploring and developing methods, policies, and projects focused on the shared and collaborative management of urban spaces and resources. LabGov is co-directed by Sheila Foster (Professor of Law and Public Policy at Georgetown University) and Christian Iaione (Professor of Public Law at LUISS University). LabGov started as the supporting unit for commons experiments in Bologna, Italy. Since 2016 a group of scholars, social entrepreneurs, cultural organisations and the municipality have worked on building an Amsterdam based branch of LabGov. See [labgov.city](https://labgov.city/about-people/) for the international network and [labgov.nl](https://www.labgov.nl/) for LabGov Amsterdam. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)