

THE CITY

AT EYE LEVEL

SECOND AND EXTENDED VERSION

LESSONS FOR STREET PLINTHS

Edited by Hans Karssenbergh, Jeroen Laven, Meredith Glaser & Mattijs van 't Hoff

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FOREWORD

Joan Clos

The character of a city is defined by its streets and public spaces. From squares and boulevards to neighbourhood gardens and children's playgrounds, public space frames the city image. In the history of cities, successful urban development has not been possible without an organized physical layout and a system of public spaces and street connectivity within cities. Streets play a critical role in cities, connecting spaces, people and goods, and thereby facilitating commerce, social interaction and mobility. Streets and public spaces have also contributed to define the cultural, social, economic and political functions of cities and towns.

Nowadays, when planning a city, the inter-play and multi-functionality between streets, public spaces and ground floor building façades (plinths) has often been overlooked or neglected. Streets are usually regarded as mere links in a road network, enabling travel, and this has often defined how the streets are used. Where public space is inadequate, poorly designed, or privatized, the city becomes increasingly segregated. Where the ground floor of a building and its relationship with the street and public space has been ignored, their use and design make the space un-attractive and sometimes unsafe.



In this light, UN-Habitat emphasizes the role of streets and public spaces as a connective matrix on which healthy and prosperous cities must grow, embracing the essential requirements of being inclusive, connected, safe, accessible, multi-functional and liveable. Therefore, the quality of the ground floor façades we pass close by at eye level is particularly important to enhance environmental sustainability, enrich the quality of life and promote equity and social inclusion. Tools and regulations to strengthen the relationship between the ground floor and the street will improve the interaction between private, semi-private, semi-public and public spaces.

Attractive public spaces and well-connected street networks encourage more people to walk and cycle, improving their health while reducing motor traffic, energy use and pollution. When designing buildings, building façades and public spaces, attention needs to be placed not only on the space itself, but the inter-play between form, function and connectivity between the buildings, the street and the open public spaces. These spaces need to be flexible enough to serve a variety of users and uses, ranging from the informal to formal.

This publication on “The City at Eye Level – lessons for street plinths” provides valuable lessons, approaches and inspiring practices on how well-designed building façades and properly designed and managed streets and public spaces not only contribute to improve the overall visual character of a city, but also stimulates economic activities and enhances the functionality of the city.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Joan Clos". The signature is written in a cursive style and is underlined with a single blue line.

Dr. Joan Clos,
Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and Executive Director, UN-Habitat

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Hans Karssenbergh, Jeroen Laven,
Meredith Glaser & Mattijs van 't Hoff

In early 2012, we started the project that would become *The City at Eye Level: Lessons for Street Plinths*, a book that was published by the end of that year. The word “plinth” was new to many readers. In Dutch the “plint” means baseboard, but also describes the ground floor of a building. We sought collective answers to the question: How can we create a user-friendly ground-level that is flexible for years to come, adaptive for multiple uses, pleasing to the eye, and all with little financial resources? Using our own expertise on the topic, and that of our network, it quickly became an open-source project with more than 40 contributing authors and many international examples. After publishing the book and launching the website (www.thecityateyelevel.com) we received many positive reactions. But the story continues.

That first book focused on plinths in the city: the ground floors that negotiate between the inside and the outside, between the public and the private. After conducting “plinth games” in Stockholm and Amsterdam, and further “public development” projects like ZOHO Rotterdam, we continued to refine the story. It’s now very clear that plinths are only one part of the story. What we now prioritize is the *human scale*: the true city at eye level. Moving beyond the plinths, we include not only physical components like the façade, building, sidewalk, street, bikeways, trees—but also the emotional and social aspects. What makes a space a place to be and a place to linger? And

more importantly, *who*? This updated and revised edition makes a better attempt at telling the whole story.

As the city evolves, so does the field of urban planning. In all of our current projects, we rely very little on our formal training in planning. After all, we are no longer planning cities—we are reinventing, reusing, and living within them. Our most meaningful, high-impact projects are founded on the principles of co-creation and depend on experimental, bottom-up initiatives, temporary use, user- and place-based strategies, and DIY urbanism. For us, co-creation is at the heart of generating long-term effects. Who is at the table, what networks are we using, what assets do we have to share, what tools can we use? As partnership patterns are changing and local/ regional municipalities no longer have a stronghold, around the table we see various user groups, community members, property owners, developers, entrepreneurs and public/private industries. Often, like many co-authors in the book, we operate as "public developer": we then take the initiative ourselves, in a collaborative spirit, to develop public space qualities in our cities. This book tries to capture the various groups and share their stories as well.

The target group of this book is everyone involved in improving cities: urban planners, local municipalities, architects, politicians, developers, entrepreneurs, and the list goes on. It even extends to the 'new investors' in the city—an increasingly important group that includes public and private organizations and companies in sectors such as education and health care.

We are very grateful for the hard work and dedicated time our contributors provided.

November 2015



THE BASICS

THE CITY AT EYE LEVEL

Hans Karssenbergh & Jeroen Laven (public developers)

A plinth is the ground floor of a building. It is a building's most crucial part for the city at eye level. What do you as a pedestrian experience when you look around? Do the buildings, their use, and their design make an attractive urban environment where you feel at home? Do the plinths connect with pedestrian flows in the urban area? What are good functions for plinths? Which set of actions and partnerships are needed to transform dysfunctional plinths? The last few years, Stipo has worked on all kinds of plinth strategies: from the CityLounge programme in Rotterdam's inner city to the transformation of Amsterdam's ugliest street into a welcoming street; from fashion in Arnhem's Klarendal to better plinths in regeneration and residential areas.

WHY PLINTHS?

The city is not only a functional environment, but also an environment of experience. Function has been fairly dominant in the past few decades, due to the combination



The Haarlemmerdijk in Amsterdam



Antwerp

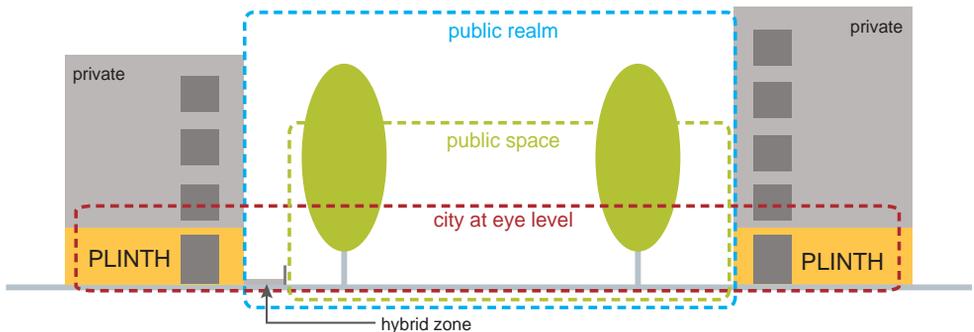
of a large post-war building production and the industrialisation of the construction process. However, now we experience, in western economies at least, the shift from 'making the city' to 'being the city'. New construction and areas of growth will persist, but the reinvention of existing urban structures will become more dominant.

After the decades of functionalism, perhaps now a correction is necessary: more attention on the urban experience, or urban warmth as we call it from an urban psychological point of view. Besides, the knowledge economy, the ever larger interconnectivity on a global level, co-working, the increasing competition between shopping and residential areas, the growth of urban-oriented people with a higher education, and the growing number of single and double households not only cause a massive reevaluation of the city as a whole, but also make the experience of that city ever more important. The squares, parks and terraces are the places where knowledge workers exchange their ideas. Places with retail and culture attract more people, and so do residential areas with an urban feel. It is all part of the larger movement of the urban renaissance caused by new interest in cities with mixed urban areas and great public spaces.

PLINTHS AND THE PUBLIC REALM

Urbanites experience their cities in what we call the 'public realm'. It has a broader meaning than just 'public space'; it includes façades of buildings and everything that can be seen at eye level. Plinths are therefore a very important part of buildings: the ground floor, the city at eye level. A building may be ugly, but with a vibrant plinth, the experience can be positive. The other way around is possible as well: a building can be very beautiful, but if the ground floor is a blind wall, the experience on the street level is hardly positive.

Plinths are crucial for the experience and attractiveness of the urban space, both in residential and commercial areas. Research shows that if the destination is safe, clean, relaxed and easily understood, and if visitors can wander around with their expectations met or exceeded,





The square Mr. Visserplein in the inner city of Amsterdam: no doors, a closed façade. Good plinths are not self-evident.

these visitors will remain three times longer and spend more money than in an unfriendly and confusing structure. Good plinths are in the interest of the urban economy, and not only because of consumer spending.

A balanced labour market with enough people with a higher education demands a functional urban environment for living, shopping and playing. The knowledge and experience economy requires spaces with character, a good atmosphere, a place to meet and to interact. The entire urban environment shapes this atmosphere, but plinths play a key role. The ground floor may be only 10% of a building, but it determines 90% of the building's contribution to the experience of the environment.

GOOD PLINTHS ARE NOT INHERENT

However logical this all may seem, we do not experience good plinths everywhere in cities. Why is that? In the projects we have worked on, we have found all kinds of reasons why the combination of interventions by government and market parties do not necessarily lead to good plinths.

Many buildings of the past have been designed from a different design perspective and their plinths are simply not suitable for attractive public functions. Also the development of 'drawing functions inside' directs the attention more to the inside world rather than the urban environment: shopping malls, multifunctional complexes for leisure, care clusters and



Primary school in the child rich newly built neighbourhood Ypenburg (The Hague) that over twenty years easily can be transformed for other purposes

campuses often are bad examples of these. Monofunctional layouts and primary attention for car use worsen the situation, as do single-use office areas.

PLINTHS AND THE NEW ECONOMY

When a plinth is successfully created, retail, cafés and restaurants often provide the highest profits. As a result of this, attention is directed at commercial functions for most (re)development projects. But is this sustainable? The last ten years the Netherlands saw a 50% increase in surface space dedicated to retail, while turnover in the sector remained the same. In the coming years the retail sector expects an additional 30% to disappear as a consequence of internet shopping. These trends require a new perspective for programming plinths with different functions, such as properly designed housing on the ground floor. We should stop clustering social functions such as primary schools in new multifunctional (and introvert) buildings, but start to create spaces in flexible plinths that can change to new uses every decade or so.

Many streets are under pressure; they have lost foot traffic and vacancy is increasing. Streets leading towards the city centres, streets around (public) transport junctions, streets in working areas and streets in residential areas are faced with vacancy or discrepancy (no suitable uses