

National Monument to the Guest Worker Hans van Houwelingen in cooperation with Mohammed Benzakour

'We have all heard of the Phoenix of Rotterdam, risen from the ashes, but who has really seen it?'

Preface

The Turkish Social-Democratic Federation, an organization with representation in the Municipal Council of Rotterdam, took an initiative in 2007 towards establishing a monument to the city's first generation of guest workers. The descendants of these foreign workers wished to pay them a tribute for their contribution to society while members of that first generation were still alive. The initiating group expanded to include members of immigrant organizations from guest worker countries other than Turkey, and united with arts organizations to form a foundation. In 2009, a committee was established to commission a monument which would express the significance of guest workers to Rotterdam. They chose Mohammed Benzakour, son of one of the first Moroccan guest workers, and artist Hans van Houwelingen.

Guest workers in Rotterdam

The industrial countries of Western Europe began to employ foreign workers during the 1950s. There was above all demand for people who were prepared to take on the heavy, irregular, dirty and relatively poorly paid jobs which were disdained by the generally better educated national populations. The latter profited from the labour shortage and opted for the better-paid jobs. The industries of Rotterdam initially turned to the surrounding region and other parts of the Netherlands to supplement their workforces. From the mid fifties onwards the search for manpower spread outside the Netherlands and especially towards the Mediterranean region. The first large contingents of foreign migrant workers came mainly from Italy followed a little later by Spain. Their numbers declined strongly after 1975 as they returned to their homelands. By this time Turkish and Yugoslavian workers formed the largest immigrant workforce, while the numbers of guest workers from Morocco was rising.

Most of the foreign guest workers who migrated to Rotterdam in the first period were brought to the Netherlands on the basis of recruitment agreements concluded between two Dutch Ministries (Social Affairs and Justice) and countries in the Mediterranean region. From the mid 1960s onwards, many guest workers also arrived in Rotterdam under their own steam; a relatively large proportion of these were Turks seeking relief from the depression in the Turkish mining and textile industries, and young Moroccans coming largely from the impoverished Rif mountains of their homeland. The Netherlands declared an end to official guest worker status during the Oil Crisis and slump of 1974. From then onwards, nearly all immigration from the former guest worker countries took place under a government family reunification scheme. Now, several generations later, a substantial portion of Rotterdam's population consists of descendants of the first generation of guest workers. Immigration has since become a controversial topic in the Netherlands, and in particular in Rotterdam. People rarely see a connection between the immigrant communities and the work carried out by the guest workers, let alone recognize the heavy work and the sacrifices they made.

Historical background

Rotterdam rose from the ashes following the massive bombardment of World War II to become what is today the most modern city of the Netherlands. The city's name personifies rebuilding; the individual dedication of those who carried out that work is nowadays largely forgotten, with the result that portrayals of them tend to be politically tinged and adapted to today's perceptions.

The 'hard-working Dutchman' is a widely-heard slogan in contemporary politics. Political parties suggest that the country was rebuilt by the industrious Dutchmen. The exact respect and proportions in which different groups contributed to the prosperity of the country is not discussed, so that 'hard-working' becomes a convenient political slogan which appeals to an electorate that thinks of itself as hard working. The unspoken identification of hard work with Dutchness makes even an unemployed Dutch citizen feel proud of his or her input to 'creating' the Netherlands as it is today. Anyone of non-Dutch origins has, by implication, no part in that input however hard he or she works. The portrayal of a history of Rotterdam as the united achievement of hard-working Dutchmen serves the political rhetoric of the Netherlands. Campaigns to clamp down on immigration feed on a historical narrative devoid of migrant workers. Guest workers are attributed no role whatsoever in the conventional reading of Rotterdam's history of 'hard-working' citizens. Everyone has heard of the Phoenix of Rotterdam, risen from the ashes, but who has really seen it?

Initiative

The first guest workers who arrived in the second half of the 1950s to work and build a future in Rotterdam are now elderly or have passed away. Their descendants call for recognition, by the majority, of guest working, and seek a way of showing appreciation for their ancestors. A monument is supposed to be the most cultivated, cultured, and eloquent instrument visualizing these wishes; it is a useful, glorifying tool in society's toolbox. The monument is supposed to recognize disparity and conveys a suggestion to think about it for a while. From a political viewpoint, on the other hand, a monument can be a device for maintaining the status quo and dispensing with the question, for the monument serves to advocate the cause instead. In the best case, a traditional monument placed here would say that it is unjust to exclude guest workers from the history of Rotterdam. Meanwhile, the hard-working Dutchman continues to embody 'the spirit of people in Rotterdam and the miracle of a modern city rising from the rubble' remaining the sole protagonist of history. This is exactly where the focus of our design lies. The monument we propose distrusts the rhetorical function of the traditional monument; it refuses to bolster a history that denies the role of the guest worker and it does not aim to be an emblem of an injustice. What it does do is to re-examine and memorialize history from a different perspective, to let history exist in a different frame of reference.

Design

On Afrikaanderplein in South Rotterdam, a suburb where large numbers of guest workers were housed, the guest workers monument will be announced by a text in nine languages on windows in a closed fence around the park on the square. Here, on the periphery of Rotterdam, the author Mohammed Benzakour, son of a Moroccan guest worker, will place a poem about the longings of the guest workers who, in the periphery of Europe, dreamed of a future in the industrialized West.¹ The result of that dream is to be found in the centre of the city, in the Constructivist sculpture by Naum Gabo which stands in front of the Bijenkorf department store on Coolingsel, which has absorbed the history of Rotterdam for the last 53 years, a site that will henceforth be inhabited by the National Monument to the Guest Worker.

The time when Naum Gabo's sculpture was erected in 1957 coincided with the arrival of the first generation of foreign guest workers. The sculpture bears witness to that era; from that point onwards it oversaw the reconstruction work from its own, unconventional but nonetheless true perspective. It bore witness to those guest workers who came to Rotterdam to realize their ideals by performing the work the city needed to be done. Half a century later, Gabo's sculpture will break its silence by speaking out about a world in the throes of globalization, a process in which the guest workers were pioneers. Contemporary guest workers – highly skilled technicians – will restore the sculpture, which is now in a deplorable condition; once that is achieved, the sculpture will accommodate the National Monument to the Guest Worker within it.²

Explanation

Gabo's intention that the sculpture would symbolize a modern city risen from the rubble and the spirit of its people, will be actualized over half a century later through a symbiotic conjunction with the guest workers. The rusting sculpture will be restored by guest workers to its former glory and the sculpture will in turn declare its historical testimony to the guest worker history.

The people of Rotterdam never ascribed a meaning to Gabo's abstract work (unlike the sculpture by Zadkine). It merely attracted nicknames such as 'the thing,' 'the flower,' 'the tree' or 'the banana.' Gabo was blamed for his failure to invest the sculpture with the meaning it promised. Gabo's work was rooted in Modernism, in the ideal of a new, better world, but his 'Bijenkorf construction' never gained widespread public acceptance. Things started going wrong even as the sculpture was being erected. Gabo received the commission because it was necessary to resolve a conflict between the city planner Van Traa, who favoured the continuation of the existing building line of Coolsingel, and the architect Breuer, who refused to modify his design to meet that requirement. The general public, however, did not accept that as a good reason for placing a work of art at the location. In the eyes of many Rotterdammers, Gabo's sculpture was a pragmatic object without meaning or content – 'a monument to the fashion trade,' as some said. Few people believed in the 1950s that an abstract work of art could have a specific meaning. Critics held that a work of art either had to be clearly representational or had to represent its subject metaphorically. The Constructivist movement that arose in Russia around 1913 through the work of Tatlin, Rodchenko, Pevsner and Gabo was regarded in intellectual circles as a politically misguided ideology. Gabo, the critics declared, would do better to leave his modernist Russian views at home. In this respect he experienced what it was like to be a guest worker in Rotterdam. His intention that the totally abstract sculpture should symbolize the spirit of post-war reconstruction was not shared by others and remained hidden in the steel. Perhaps this is why the work has been allowed to deteriorate to such an extent. The sculpture remained anonymous, so people felt little motivation to maintain it properly. Gabo used novel materials, but the combination of bronze with steel proved an unfortunate choice. The sculpture began corroding within a few years of its placing and required a round of restoration as early as 1960. Today, one of the most important post-war works of art in Rotterdam's public arena is in a pitiable state. The present owners of the sculpture offered it to the City of Rotterdam but the latter refused the gift on account of its dilapidated condition.

Mohammed Benzakour and Hans van Houwelingen request the City of Rotterdam to engage guest workers once more: skilled people, contemporary specialized guest workers, who will restore the sculpture and return it to peak condition. They will approach the reconstruction of the city as a mirror image. This time the monument will itself be reconstructed; the sculpture itself will rise again from the rubble and its ruinous state. Contemporary guest workers work, so to speak, in the reverse direction, backwards in time, into history, returning the sculpture to its former glorious state. That is the moment at which the descendants reach out a hand to their fathers, in a timeless labour contract: that is the moment at which the monument to the guest worker will exist.

This unorthodox course of action will lead to a monument that denies the history that denies the guest worker. A monument that is not a lament about an injustice, but a manifesto for the preservation for this important piece of Rotterdam heritage: the monument to the guest worker will be contained within Gabo's sculpture, invisible, but essential to that sculpture's continued existence. It is not a monument that puts the guest worker history into words, but which lets the guest worker have his say. Restoration of Naum Gabo's dilapidated sculpture is the *Monument to the Guest Worker*.

This action will ultimately be to everyone's benefit. The monument will not leave a visual impression on the Gabo sculpture but will be integrated with it in the most radical way possible. It will itself be invisible, for the sculpture was already there. Unlike Zadkine's monument, which symbolizes the reconstruction era in relation to the War and the enemy, the symbolism of the Monument to the Guest Worker is wholly abstract. The 'better world' implicit in this monument has no opposite pole, no counterpoint or enemy; it relates, rather, to society in a wider sense, and literally visualizes an end to prejudice. Gabo himself described his sculpture as organic, and therefore open to future interpretations. The debate that will follow the publication of this plan will show whether the Netherlands is prepared to welcome the monument to the guest worker, and ascribe monumental status to Gabo's world-renowned work of art. An annual symbolic reception of 'guests' at the *National Monument to the Guest Worker* in Coolsingel, with speeches by politicians, thinkers, and others would fulfil the dream of the first generation of guest workers as described by Mohammed Benzakour.

Relevance

In our plan, the comfortably ordered deck of cards – of history, of the reconstruction of Rotterdam, of post-war art in the public domain and of the function of a ‘monument’ – will be politically reshuffled. The result will be a disruption, to a greater or lesser extent, of historical continuity. This reshuffling, this reanimation, will shed light on the role of guest workers in the post-war reconstruction and couple it with the history and meaning of Gabo’s sculpture. Guest workers will restore the sculpture in what could be seen as an uncomfortably generous gesture. It will be generous as a contribution to preservation of this important piece of cultural heritage. It will be an uncomfortable reminder of their history in this monument, and of the present politico-historical consensus – immigration and reconstruction make poor bedfellows in the present political climate –, which is thereby challenged. For history is always composed as a result of the present and a guarantee for the future.

A critique was voiced by Sculpture International Rotterdam, that the sculpture will be altered (although corrosion has been doing that for decades), and that others will be excluded if the work is labelled as a monument to the guest worker and that Rotterdam will be saddled with a political burden. This is understandable but unreasonable, considering that this design will have to extend beyond the comfort zone of its initiators if the city honestly wishes to house a monument to the guest worker. Our proposal is not a matter of consensus or of multicultural rhetoric, as one might too easily expect with this subject matter, but it discloses a machinery of inclusion and exclusion that exists in the present by literally re-memorializing the past. The aim is to prevent the *Monument to the Guest Worker* being devalued by a kind of ‘they plus we equals us’ politics; the historical wrinkle in the face of the past would be smoothed away and history would resume its secure course. We have to avoid a marriage of convenience with our co-nationals, and instead depict a changed, globalized world in which guest workers were the pioneers, as prickly as that realization may be. It is after all a proclamation of a discontinuity, even if it breaches the sense of identity. The *Monument to the Guest Worker* claims its place in the history of the post-war reconstruction era and in a world that rose from the ruins of war.

Notes

1. Mohammed Benzakour

DREAM

To the Guest Worker

In the Beginning was the Dream

Travelled the seas, exchanged skies
His soil remained his soil

Sun on back, eyes clouded
His moon remained his moon

Leg petrified, foot rusted
His soul remained his soul

Then, sweat dried, he placed his hand
His shoulders touched ours
And we built, we built

A tower in the sky
Home in the heavens
A new dream...

In the Beginning was the Dream, and the Dream is with us

2. On 17 February 2010, the design was unanimously approved by the patronage committee, which included representatives of: Centrum Beeldende Kunst Rotterdam, external artistic advisers on art in the public domain, Rotterdam Historical Museum, members of Rotterdam Municipal Council, Platform Buitenlanders Rotterdam, Welzijn Charlois, Turkse Sociaaldemocratische Federatie, Stichting Belangenbehartiging Migratie Nederland, deputation of former Greek guest workers, Feijenoord/Stichting Nieuwe Rotterdamse Cultuur, member organizations of SMOR, Zuid Mosque, Turkish/Netherlands environmental organization TEMA, MTNL, NOS/NP
