# 9. Satellite Dishes, a Creative Incubator, and the Displacement of Aesthetics in Amsterdam

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**Abstract**

This chapter examines an aesthetic clash in the neighbourhood of Bos en Lommer in Amsterdam. One side of the street features decorated satellite dishes attached to social housing, which constitutes a battleground for otherness. Such dishes are broadly opposed in Dutch public and institutional discourse for being “ugly,” which amounts to xenophobia expressed in aesthetic terms. Opposite is a disused school building recently converted to an art-space-cum-hostel called WOW Amsterdam, a “creative incubator” that injects aesthetic difference and thereby the politics of gentrification into the area through foregrounding art, fashion and consumption. I argue that this clash shows how aesthetics are politics, and that the newly-inserted global gentrification aesthetic – following the creative incubator formula – displaces the aesthetics, and politics, of the battle for otherness across the street.

**Keywords:** Amsterdam, satellite dishes, creative city, displacement, distribution of the sensible

In an otherwise unremarkable street, in a generally unattractive neighbourhood in Amsterdam West, a colourful political clash is quietly taking place. On one side of this street, decorated satellite dishes are attached to the balconies of a mid-twentieth-century, government-subsidized social housing apartment block, for example with butterflies or flowers painted on them (Figure 9.1). On the other side of the street, immediately opposite the apartment block, is a former school building recently converted to a

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A hostel-cum-art-space called WOW Amsterdam (Figure 9.2), with colourfully designed signage on the front of the building. The reused building is a prime instance of a “creative incubator” (broedplaats in Dutch): a municipally designated site, frequently in a disused building, for artists’ studios, galleries and cultural activities, and in the case of WOW also with accommodation for artists and a hostel for tourists (see Peck 2012 for a thorough account of Amsterdam’s incubator policy). The mainly residential surrounding area consists of unassuming – many people say drab and dull – social housing, so if you don’t know the area, you could easily think that these colourful exceptions to the area are related. For example, you might think that artists from WOW painted the satellite dishes, to add colour and break the monotony of the appearance of social housing. In this chapter I argue that, while both sides of the street are colourful patches within their surroundings, their aesthetics are entwined with two very different politics: the dishes express a resistance to the oppression of otherness, whereas WOW inserts the aesthetics and politics of gentrification in this area. Even though there is no overt conflict between the two sides, the result of this clash is that gentrification is crowding out the battle for otherness in terms of aesthetics and (or as) politics.

While both sides seem akin in their colourfulness, the decorations on the dishes don’t actually have anything to do with WOW, since they predate the conversion of the school building into a creative incubator by
several years. More importantly, the decorations on the satellite dishes themselves constitute a site of political struggle. Unlike other cultures where such dishes can be a positive sign of wealth or connection to other parts of the world (see Dibazar 2016 on satellite dishes on rooftops in Iran), in the Dutch context they are almost uniformly considered eyesores and are commonly perceived to signify migrants and a bad neighbourhood. In the past 30 years, these dishes have been broadly opposed – e.g. in housing association policy – frequently in a rhetoric of “fighting” them primarily because they are ugly. As I will unpack more extensively below, this general perception of satellite dishes in public and institutional discourse bespeaks an opposition to otherness: xenophobia and racism thinly veiled by the aesthetic judgement “ugly.” The dishes indicated that the migrants aren’t watching Dutch television, which was often taken as a symbol of “failing multiculturalism” – yet the chief argument against the dishes, in public and institutional discourse, remains that they are ugly. The decorations on the dishes are thus a response to make pretty on the surface what is deemed ugly on the surface, part of a complex and layered political discourse.

The aesthetics of WOW are equally political in nature, in the sense that they are part of a strategy aimed at altering a neighbourhood. When viewed critically, the creative incubator generally acts as a cultural-artistic crowbar for gentrifying a neighbourhood. As a government-led gentrification policy, it involves aesthetics in two ways. Firstly, WOW foregrounds activities geared
towards aesthetics – in the sense of having to do with visual beauty – as a space for art exhibitions, art production, fashion, cultural events, and tourism. Secondly, as a space WOW features a particular aesthetic – in the sense of a distinctive look and design – of a hip, reused space in line with a global gentrification aesthetic that instrumentally foregrounds that look of reuse itself. Hence, the aesthetics of this project, in both regards, are inseparable from the politics of WOW as a bridgehead for gentrification and the changes it brings to the area. WOW is therefore a political-aesthetic insertion in the neighbourhood that combines the formula of the creative incubator with a global aesthetic of gentrification.

On both sides of the street, then, politics and aesthetics are deeply intertwined, but with radically different political stakes: a battle for otherness is taking place in the decorated satellite dishes, and WOW is a gambit in municipal gentrification policy. Hence, the question is how these two sides of the street relate to each other. My argument in this chapter is that while the aesthetics of WOW do not directly engage with the dynamics at work in the decorated dishes, the effect is nonetheless that the politics of the decorations are overshadowed, crowded out, by the insertion of a large-scale, culture-led gentrification project. Following the work of Rancière (2004, 2009), this case study therefore underscores how aesthetics itself is a matter of politics. While gentrification research has frequently focused on displacement of people in gentrification process (Marcuse 1986; Slater 2006; Newman and Wyly 2006; Shaw and Hagemans 2015), I argue that WOW works as an instance of the displacement of aesthetics through gentrification.

A Bad Neighbourhood with Satellite Dishes

Firstly, some context about the neighbourhood is necessary before unpacking this case study. The neighbourhood, part of the larger area called Bos en Lommer, was part of a large-scale expansion of Amsterdam, envisioned in the General Extension Plan of 1934, but built in the early 1950s, in the post-WWII reconstruction period when funds were limited. The area chiefly consists of rows of cheaply built social housing, in modernist apartment blocks – basically north-south oriented oblong boxes – generally five storeys high, aimed at housing the working class (for a history of the area see Van Rossum 1993). However, unforeseen suburbanization of the working class in the 1960s left much of the housing stock vacant. This meant that a concurrent influx of migrant workers and their families could be housed there instead (Cortie 2003). Ever since, the neighbourhood
has been characterized by a high proportion of residents with a migrant background, predominantly Moroccan and Turkish, which entails a great number of satellite dishes attached to balconies and façades. The residents use the dishes to view television channels – often in Arabic or Turkish – that aren’t available through basic cable. Hence, the satellite dish is a marker for non-white residents, particularly associated with low-income areas of social housing.

In 2007 the neighbourhood was designated the worst in the country, based on a government ranking that factored in issues like average income of the residents, level of education, size and age of houses, vandalism, and survey data on satisfaction and desire to move elsewhere (Ministerie van Infrastructuur en Waterstaat 2007). This governmental ranking – highly criticized at the time – profiled neighbourhoods on the basis of criteria that were in many respects a given for the areas. For example, social housing regulations entail a necessary correlation between maximum apartment size and level of income, and consequently a correlation with level of education and frequently race and migrant background as well. Stigmatization in terms of class and race was the result. Still, the government designation consolidated the general perception that this was a bad area. The satellite dish is relevant in this regard, since it is commonly regarded as a symbol for a bad neighbourhood. The chief complaint about the satellite dish is that it is ugly, which amounts to xenophobic and affectively charged rhetoric in aesthetic terms. Especially since the 1990s, there has been a consistent public and institutional discourse – e.g. in housing association policies and in legal proceedings – that has opposed these satellite dishes. The common sentiment is candidly explained in this example taken from Amsterdam-based newspaper Het Parool:

Ten, fifteen years ago the satellite dish symbolized everything that was wrong with the multicultural society... Stories about migrants were invariably illustrated with images of tenement buildings with white dishes as far as the eye could see. The message: there’s poor integration here, and a strong orientation towards Turkey or Morocco [...] the ongoing battle against the satellite dish is always waged under the banner of defacement. Dishes are prohibited because they affect a neighbourhood's image, but also because damage to the buildings occurs while placing them. According to [a chairperson of a tenants' association] those are important reasons to want as few satellite dishes attached to buildings. “But also because the dish represents decay and a lack of integration.” (Kruyswijk 2015, emphasis added)
The common discourse thus seems to concentrate on the satellite dish not so much in its materiality, but on its representational function as sign of otherness. More to the point, the dish becomes the focal point for a combative rhetoric, presented as a symbol of problems of multiculturalism that negatively affects a neighbourhood and thereby requiring an ‘ongoing battle’ against it. The dishes are not themselves decaying – some of them are brand new, and in fact the installation of new dishes frequently faces the greatest opposition – nor do they realistically point towards a lack of ‘integration’. In fact, a study commissioned by the authoritative Netherlands Institute for Social Research (Van den Broek and Keuzekamp 2008) debunked any notion that these satellite dishes and the associated television watching behaviour realistically related to any lack of integration. These notions of decay and problems of integration are part of a xenophobic rhetoric, which takes the material presence of these objects to be a negative sign of otherness and subsequently casts resistance to this material-presence-as-sign in aesthetic categories: the dishes are opposed under the banner of ‘defacement’, of making the neighbourhood ugly. If one places this common discourse against satellite dishes alongside the governmental designation of part of Bos en Lommer as the worst neighbourhood in the country, one can see the political charge that these dishes symbolically have: not only as a condensation point for xenophobic rhetoric, but also a representation of urban decay.

The connection between aesthetics and politics at work in the satellite dishes can be further understood with some examples from legal discourse. Since the 1990s, dozens of court cases in the Netherlands have revolved around these dishes, typically involving disputes about the removal of a dish between housing associations and their tenants. The outcomes of these cases have varied, depending on the details of the particular case. If anything, these legal battles show that the institutional opposition to satellite dishes is not clearly winning. Yet the arguments made in these cases are telling. The objections from the housing associations commonly revolve around not following regulations or permission procedures regarding installation of dishes, as well as aesthetic arguments that satellite dishes negatively affect a building’s or area’s general image. The tenant’s defence frequently turns to Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which lays down the freedom of expression and includes the freedom “to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers” (European Court of Human Rights 2010). The typical court case thus revolves around weighing regulations and aesthetic objections against human rights.
As in popular discourse, defacement is the key term legal disputes too. It should be noted that the Dutch term – “ontsieren,” literally “unpret­tying” – denotes the undoing of a pre-existing beauty that usually goes undiscussed. The term is therefore structured such that it focuses on changes to a presumed status quo. A recent court case before the Amsterdam Court of Appeal, widely considered to set an important legal precedent, provided a more specific definition of defacement in the case of satellite dishes. The chief argument that led to ruling in favour of the housing association in this case was the sufficient availability of alternatives for watching foreign-language television via the internet – a ruling that has become more prevalent in recent years. Nonetheless, the court took on aesthetic arguments as well:

In the weighing of interests the court takes into consideration that the installed satellite dish is clearly visible on the façade of the building, even if the dish is not white. The building is, as [the housing association] has rightly argued, situated in an image-defining location on the IJ [waterfront] and, being an old warehouse, is characterized by sleek architecture. This sleek architecture is interrupted by the presence of satellite dishes, which can thereby be considered defacing. [The housing association] therefore has a reasonable interest in opposing the presence of the satellite dish on aesthetic grounds. (Rechtspraak 2015, emphasis added)

This part of the ruling clearly grounds itself in visual categories: visibility in public space, colour, general image of the waterfront, and architectural style. Other factors that might play a role in housing are not raised, for example the fact that everyday life means inhabiting a space and making it one’s own. On the basis of visual and aesthetic categories, then, the ruling assumes that the sleekness of the architecture – for which the Dutch term “strak” could also be translated as “tight” or “rigid” – as a pre-existing order, whose pre-existence is taken as a given. Interruption of that order is subsequently judged to be defacing. This part of the ruling thus follows the structure of “defacement” in presuming a particular prior aesthetic and regarding the dish as an aesthetic imposition that sullies the underlying beauty. Furthermore, the negative aesthetic judgement of the dish hinges not on an inherent property of the dish – it is not deemed ugly in itself – but on the fact that the dish is an object out of place: it does not aesthetically belong there. As with the public discourse that dismisses the dishes as eyesores, the court’s ruling focuses mainly on the dish as ugly addition, not on the building’s beauty.
The opposition to the satellite dish, in popular discourse and in law, should be understood in light of Rancière’s work on the connection between aesthetics and politics. On a surface level, the opposition to the dishes as ugly clearly casts political opposition in aesthetic terms, in the sense of pertaining to beauty (or its opposite). However, Rancière’s understanding of politics and aesthetics is more fundamental and pervasive, which he developed with specific reference to modern art, but is employable more broadly (e.g. Dikeç 2012, illustratively uses Rancière’s work to understand the representation of the banlieues in French media). Rancière argues that the realm of the sensible – that which can be seen, said, and understood – is structured through an organization of what registers as sensible in the first place. He calls this the “distribution of the sensible” which “reveals who can have a share in what is common to the community based on what they do and on the time and space in which this activity is performed” (Rancière 2004: 12). Simply put, the distribution of the sensible includes as visible those who have a place in the shared socio-political order and have a voice, and excludes as invisible those who do not register and have no voice. Politics, for Rancière, then becomes not a matter of institutional relations of power, but of “the configuration of a specific space, the framing of a particular sphere of experience, of objects posited as common and as pertaining to a common decision, of subjects recognized as capable of designating these objects and putting forward arguments about them” (2009: 24). Aesthetics are politics, and vice versa, in the process of shaping urban space and determining who has a place and a voice there and who hasn’t.

In this light, it becomes clear that what is at stake in the satellite dishes is precisely a political-aesthetic clash over otherness, in terms of a distribution of the sensible. The presence of the dishes on the façades constitutes a symbolic shaping of urban space in which the practices of the residents are made visible. They make sensible the otherness of the residents, which is also precisely the basis for the opposition to the dishes: designating the dishes “ugly” and “defacing” is precisely an endeavour to render mute those others in their capacity of shaping their urban environment. The dish as eyesore that represents decay, as in the newspaper example cited above, takes the everyday practices of the residents out of the picture (the image of a neighbourhood), rendering their voices mute. Likewise, the legal ruling cited above stipulates what is deemed commonly apparent and what is not. Architectural style is taken into account and practices of everyday life are not. More to the point, the general image-defining property of the building is valued – which implicitly extends to real-estate value – whereas an everyday object from a migrant resident is deemed an unsightly imposition by virtue
of being a visible addition. Hence, the aesthetic judgement not only has legal consequences, but is also deeply political in nature in that it allocates which objects – and thereby which people – belong in public space and which should not be visible. The opposition to the dishes therefore amounts to a distribution of the sensible that in this case oppresses otherness.

This finally brings me back to the decorated dishes in the street in Bos en Lommer. I argue that these decorations should be regarded as a response that takes the political-aesthetic discourse against satellite dishes head on. On an immediate and simple level, the decorations respond to the common disapproval of the dishes as being eyesores by making them prettier. More substantially, though, the decorations highlight precisely the superficial rhetoric of the opposition to them, because undoing the perceived ugliness of these dishes does not in fact substantially undo the problem. After all, it is not aesthetics in the simple sense of beauty vs. ugliness that is at stake, but rather aesthetics as politics – the distribution of the sensible which accords what and who belongs in public space and not. Hence, the decorations call attention precisely to the xenophobia inherent in the judgement of the dishes as ugly impositions. In the same gesture, the decorations call attention to the material presence of the dishes in the first place, a making-visible precisely of an everyday object of the people who reside there. Hence, by prominently adding colour, these dishes evince a dense and layered battle for otherness, as a form of resistance that offers a redistribution of the sensible, by highlighting the political-aesthetic struggle taking place within them.

**WOW as Creative Incubator**

Across the street, an entirely different political-aesthetic battle is taking place, with entirely different stakes. Since 2014 the former school building has been in use as WOW Amsterdam. It has become a successful instance of the municipal “creative incubator” – broedplaatsen in Dutch – policy (see Gemeente Amsterdam 2019). Typically, these projects involve disused buildings or sites which are municipally designated for reuse as art spaces, businesses in the creative industry, and for cultural activities. In the case of WOW, this former school building now provides exhibition spaces, temporary artists’ accommodation, a restaurant, cultural and educational activities, and a hostel for tourists. Hence, WOW is a municipally-designated project, in an area consisting largely of (originally) state-funded social housing. As Peck (2012) explains in his account of the emergence of this policy in the late 1990s, Amsterdam consolidated existing developments in the city’s
cultural landscape – e.g. rooted in projects originating from the squatters movement – into creative city policies, making use of the hype surrounding Richard Florida’s ideas on the creative class in the early 2000s. The creative incubator policy in Amsterdam, for Peck, shows that “creative policies are contributing to the extension and consolidation of culturally normalized neoliberal–urban rule. They purposefully legitimize and rationalize highly targeted and fiscally modest urban investments, justified on the basis of putative (but in practice highly elusive) economic returns” (2012: 482). As Peck explains, these projects require relatively little financial investment, making the policy a cheap way to potentially raise the profile (and real-estate value) of a neighbourhood. While the link between art, culture and gentrification is a long-standing one – e.g. classically explored by Zukin (1982) and for more on other initiatives in Amsterdam that employ art in the process of urban redevelopment, see Lindner and Meissner (2015) – the creative incubator is thus an example of art-led urban regeneration but also clearly of a government-led form of gentrification.

In this regard, the case of WOW should also be viewed within the broader context of government-led gentrification in the Netherlands. As Uitermark et al. (2007) discuss, Dutch government-led gentrification policies target “practically all disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods” (126) in which the goal is not merely to advance the middle classes or to increase the tax base, but rather “gentrification is a means through which governmental organizations and their partners lure the middle classes into disadvantaged areas with the purpose of civilizing and controlling these neighbourhoods” (127). Such policies are not geared towards financial gains per se, but are employed as tools for the ideological goal of civilizing and controlling – in other words: disciplining – neighbourhoods that are considered bad. Under the banner of increasing “liveability,” government-led gentrification policies amount to political interventions in the everyday lives of the inhabitants of a neighbourhood, for example by reshaping urban space and changing who can live there. WOW Amsterdam, therefore, can be seen as an instance where creative policies and government-led gentrification policies intersect as a means of intervening precisely in the neighbourhood that was designated the worst in the country. While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to further analyze the recent developments in the local housing market and subsequent demographic changes, a significant portion of the social housing stock in the neighbourhood is being demolished, replaced, and sold off into the private market by the housing associations. In this regard, the dynamics of the creative incubator policy are in line with Atkinson and Easthope’s findings (2009) in several Australian cities where they discern “the often tacit
understanding of the ways in which encouraging artists provides a seedbed for a kind of staged gentrification,” which goes hand in hand with “a greater optimism toward the role of arts and communities in the development of the city, but also the much clearer elevation of artists as the temporary vanguards of creative strategies, often displaced by the subsequent raising of rents through commercial and residential gentrification” (71).

The combination of art-culture-tourism in WOW further extends the policy-level conjunction between politics and aesthetics by partaking in what can be understood as a global gentrification aesthetic. Mathews (2010) argues that the “inclusion of the arts as a seedbed for gentrification has led to the rise of controlled and contrived spaces designed around the public consumption of art, artists, and art spaces. Flagship architecture, cultural quarters, festivals, and public art displays are used to promote a ‘liveable’ and ‘beautified’ urban core, aspects that are highly valued in attracting the middle and upper-middle classes” (672). This can be cast in terms of what Lees et al. (2008) discuss as the “gentrification aesthetic”: a “gentrifying or gentrified neighborhood has a certain ‘feel’ to it, a certain look, a landscape of conspicuous consumption that makes the process readily identifiable” (113). A further understanding of the gentrification aesthetic, beyond aesthetics referring simply to matters of visual appearance and beauty and focusing more on consumption, is developed frequently with reference to Bourdieu (e.g. Jager 1986; Bridge 2001, 2006; Ley 2003) as a middle-class aesthetic disposition oriented towards cultural capital, which is economically valorized. Such a “look” and aesthetic are recognizable components of many of Amsterdam’s creative incubators. Obviously, the prominence of art and fashion in the case of WOW makes it a space for the consumption of culture.

More importantly, in my view, this gentrification aesthetic is apparent from the building of WOW itself. The existing building is left mainly intact, still recognizable as a large school building, but prominently marked as reused for a different purpose (e.g. in the huge sign on the front of the building in Figure 9.2). The effect of this “look” is twofold. Firstly, it conveys reuse itself as a marker of urban redevelopment, with processes of change being valued in themselves. This can be seen in the emphasis on temporariness and dynamism, as on WOW’s website, for example (see Figure 9.3). Secondly, this “look” conveys that the reuse is artistic-cultural in nature, rather than commercial, for example. Even the most commercial side of WOW, the tourism, is framed in terms of consumption of art and culture, as will be discussed in more detail below.

In this chapter, however, I emphasize the inherently political aspect of the gentrification aesthetic itself. Within gentrification processes and policies
like the creative incubator, the foregrounding of the visual, the beautiful, or the fashionable “look” of an area should, I argue, be viewed as a political organization of urban space. My turn to Rancière shifts attention to the idea that the gentrification aesthetic is not only a matter of a response to or consumption of culture and the arts. Rather, the global gentrification aesthetic, especially in government-led cases like WOW, is structured such that it entails who has a place and a voice – e.g. middle-class citizens and the globally operating creative class – and who does not. The inclusionary and exclusionary dynamics of gentrification are part and parcel of the aesthetics of gentrification itself. In practical terms, the creative incubator policy serves to make visible the redevelopment of an area of the city, allocating to artists and the creative class a new share in public space. Yet while the figure of the artist or cultural producer is the poster child for projects like WOW, one should not automatically attribute agency or empowerment to artists and producers in the process of gentrification. As Ley (2003) argues, “to blame artists for the gentrification that so often follows their residency in a district is a misplaced charge; it is the societal valorisation of the cultural competencies of the artist that brings followers richer in economic capital” (2541). Unlike the Canadian context Ley writes about, in the Dutch context the societal valorisation is not dependent upon market dynamics but is inherent in the government-led nature of the creative incubator policy. Hence, as Peck (2012) argues, “for their very credibility ... creative-cities policies must tap into, and valorize, local sources of cultural edginess, conferring bit-part roles to creative workers as a badge of authenticity for the policies themselves” (468). What the creative incubator renders visible, therefore, is above all the policy and discourse of creativity in the service of neoliberal politics of urban redevelopment. The visibility of art and culture in these projects should therefore be understood as itself representational in class terms: the point of such gentrification policies is to make visible the redistribution of the share that the middle class can or will have in a redeveloped neighbourhood. In simple terms, in foregrounding the aesthetic in art, culture and fashion, the aesthetics of WOW therefore communicate above all “gentrification is going on here.”

**WOW: Difference and Aesthetic Displacement**

Perhaps the key feature of WOW – and of the creative incubator policy in general – is that it explicitly injects difference into the neighbourhood. This is underscored on WOW’s Facebook page under “About”: “WOW is
where tourists open to cultural exchange rub shoulders with recent art school graduates, and where community influencers walk the halls with tomorrow’s agents of change” (WOW Amsterdam 2017). Every element of this self-description underscores the difference between WOW and its neighbours. Firstly, whereas the migrant population of the neighbourhood is aging, WOW squarely emphasizes youth, both in focusing on recent art school graduates – graduating school is evidently not indicative enough of youth – and in the type of tourist it aims to attract, with its shared dormitories described as “clean and mean rooms in primary colours, for city people and art lovers” (WOW Amsterdam, n.d.). Secondly, the focus is on art and culture in a neighbourhood that has very little to offer in that regard. This implies on the one hand that WOW is a destination itself as an art and culture enclave within this neighbourhood. Apart from the announced shoulder-rubbing with artists, the shared dormitories are described with “What’s more? Lots of possibilities to meet other creative people!” (WOW Amsterdam, n.d.), indicating again that WOW itself is a destination particularly for the globally mobile creative class. In addition, this emphasis on art and creativity is an attempt to rhetorically reshape the city, to extend the “artscape” of Amsterdam – traditionally concentrated in the city centre – to include the neighbourhood of Bos en Lommer. Lastly, the lingo of “influencers” as encountered on social media, which joins forces with tomorrow’s agents of change (in whatever realm), underscores that making a difference lies at the heart of WOW as a project. WOW is thus explicitly predicated on difference to its surroundings, with that difference itself recursively geared towards transformation and with art and culture as its primary domain – actively reshaping who has a place where in the city.

This difference with the surrounding neighbourhood is also reinforced visually, prominently in the signage on the front of the building (see Figure 9.2). The rectangles in the sign do not break with the rectangular, modernist architecture, but the once-stark but now slightly faded colours of the boxes do. They inject a note of colour, like the decorated satellite dishes do, in an otherwise drab area. Moreover, the range of verbs on the sign stands in a curious relation to the neighbourhood as a primarily residential area. WOW’s sign amounts to an inventory of activities of everyday life – eat, drink, sleep, work, play, read, watch, think, wonder, and relax. This inventory of possible actions in WOW is strikingly mundane, unlike the art-and-change-oriented discourse with which WOW presents itself online. The question is then to whom this sign is directed. If it were directed to the artists residing in WOW, something like “create,” “design,” or “exchange” might seem more pertinent. If it were directed towards the
tourists, the message seems hardly distinctive and also incongruous with the presentation elsewhere of WOW as unique. Likewise, the sign does not seem to be a message straightforwardly directed towards the people of the neighbourhood, who might go eat there or watch art but are very unlikely to sleep in the hostel. In my reading, then, the sign on WOW’s façade is not a message directed towards anyone in particular, but rather serves as a catalogue of everyday life so as to integrate WOW into the everyday life of the area: just as people lead their everyday lives in this residential area, so too does everyday life take place in WOW Amsterdam. Of course, this integration is superficial and contradictory, since the everyday practices of residents who inhabit the area differ significantly from the artists in their temporary studios and the tourist practices of the (young, hip, art-minded) guests of the hostel. The sign therefore suggests continuity with the area but in so doing instead underscores the difference between WOW and the rest of the neighbourhood.

Furthermore, the sign on the building’s exterior points to crucial point of difference, namely that the aesthetics of WOW are to a certain extent attached to their locality – the specificity of this particular creative incubator – but are geared towards extending globally. In contrast, the surrounding neighbourhood remains decidedly local in character. As a mainly residential area consisting of social housing, it is not an area that has traditionally contributed to Amsterdam’s self-styled brand as a global city, which is oriented particularly towards neoliberal capital and finance. This branding is frequently historically anchored in the city’s mercantile past in the seventeenth century, and generally ignores histories of colonialism and migration. Culturally, the focus has been on cultural heritage – located in more central areas – and the creative industries. This branding notably downplays the migrant backgrounds of the residents of poorer areas (pre-gentrification, at least) such as Bos en Lommer. WOW not only differs because it attracts tourists from across the world, but this global outreach is also enacted aesthetically, as becomes clear from WOW’s website (see Figure 9.3). The design of the signage on the building’s exterior, with its colourful rectangles, is extended on the website, where it makes up the navigation menu, for example. The coherence of the design between material and virtual space can be read in two directions. On the one hand, the website continues the aesthetics of the building’s signage online, extending the local aesthetics globally. On the other hand, particularly from the perspective of a tourist whose first encounter with WOW is likely its website, for the purpose of making a reservation, the graphic design of the sign can be seen as extension of the online presence of WOW, making the local an instantiation of a global aesthetic.
This global aspect of the aesthetics of WOW is a vital point of contrast between WOW and the political-aesthetic battle taking place in the decorated satellite dishes on the other side of the street. As an intervention in a bad neighbourhood, WOW interrupts the distinctly local character of the area with an aesthetic of both gentrification and globalization. It not only colourfully alters the look of the area, but also serves to make this an area for a particular type of tourist: young people, hipsters, and those belonging, or aspiring, to the globally operating creative class. The insertion of this creative incubator in this neighbourhood has thus led to a new presence of tourists in the area, often confusedly looking for public transport which, ironically, is no longer immediately available in front of WOW because of a much-criticized redesign of public transport, frequently to the detriment of poorer areas outside of the city centre (like Bos en Lommer) and to the benefit of tourist areas in the city centre. WOW and its tourist presence radically alter the “look” of the area, which in political-aesthetic terms should be understood as a redistribution of the sensible. The aesthetics of the building and the tourists in the area visually establish who has a place and a voice there: this has become an area for and of the creative class. I argue that one can view the young and art-minded tourists as analogous to the satellite dishes, to a certain extent: both are additions to or impositions on the pre-existing political-aesthetic makeup of the area. The general logic of aesthetically opposing the satellite dishes is that they are impositions that alter the pre-existing aesthetics – they do not belong there and are therefore deemed ugly, at least rhetorically. The introduction of tourists, or the imposition of
a massive sign on the front of WOW’s building for that matter, is no less an alteration of the pre-existing political-aesthetic arrangement in the neighbourhood. Like the migrant residents, the tourists can be viewed as global others, but with the crucial difference that the aesthetic presence of the migrant residents in the shape of their satellite dishes is broadly opposed in highly charged public and institutional discourse, whereas the presence of the tourists has the political-aesthetic neoliberal stamp of approval. The global aesthetic of gentrification has gained a firm foothold, whereas the local political-aesthetic signs of otherness remain under pressure.

Finally, this brings me back to both the similarity in terms of colourfulness and the vast divide in terms of politics between both sides of the street. Colourfulness on both sides of the street is crucial, but it means something else entirely for the decorated dishes and WOW respectively. For the dishes, the aesthetics appear light-hearted on the surface, but entail a dense and layered struggle against socio-political marginalization. Aesthetic opposition to the dishes for being “eyesores” amounts to xenophobic oppression of the everyday practices of migrant residents. The dishes themselves are a battleground for otherness, and the decorations are a political-aesthetic response against the dominant discourse. The politics of the decorations are importantly also markedly local: they pertain to a particular set of objects, belonging to this particular group of people with a migrant background in this particular part of the city dominated by social housing. The constellation of aesthetics and politics is therefore specifically tied to this location. In contrast, for WOW’s colour effectuates an aesthetic departure from the neighbourhood on a larger scale, fitting in with gentrification developments within the city as a whole. The colourfulness of WOW stands in contrast with the unassuming neighbourhood, but more importantly the political-aesthetic change brought about by the insertion of a creative incubator as a bridgehead for gentrification largely serves to counteract any specificity to the location: it inserts a global gentrification aesthetic according to the formula of the creative incubator.

This has significant consequences for the possibilities of aesthetics-as-politics in the area. In practical terms, WOW is the larger presence because of the size of the building, and emblematically also because of the size of its sign compared to the size of a decorated satellite dish, but also because of the broad (government) backing it enjoys. The dominant aesthetic regime of the area, therefore, is determined much more by WOW than by the decorated satellite dishes. The insertion of the creative incubator in this area is thereby effectively a redistribution of the sensible in that it determines what can readily or commonly be registered and how. Visually
the dominant association has become that between aesthetics and the politics of gentrification rather than an aesthetics of (and as) resistance. The colourful alteration of the dishes is diminished in its political-aesthetic impact, because colour has largely come to signify something else in the neighbourhood. In other words, the politics within the decorated dishes are rendered mute: the global aesthetics of WOW as a dominant presence crowd out the political-aesthetic battle for otherness taking place across the street. The effect of this gentrification project, therefore, is the displacement of local aesthetics-as-politics.

**Conclusion**

In a study of aesthetic aspects of gentrification in Singapore, Chang (2016) argues that “gentrification aesthetics also involves the adding of requisite ‘right look’ and the expunging of undesired looks” (537). In my case in Amsterdam that does not immediately seem to be happening materially: WOW is successful as an institution but that has not led to conflict with the other side of the street – no particular complaints about the dishes, nor has there been much opposition to the conversion of the school building to a creative incubator, for that matter. In that sense, both sides of the street sit happily side by side. However, in terms of politics and aesthetics the two sides of the street are incompatible. For WOW, the prominence of art and culture is part of its “look” of gentrification, which is an aesthetic spearhead for a creative city and gentrification policy that intervenes in the neighbourhood designated the worst in the country. It visually and aesthetically restructures the area in the interest of neoliberal urban politics. For the dishes, aesthetics is the domain for a battle for otherness, where oppression within public and institutional discourse meets aesthetic resistance in the form of the decorations. The arrangement of who has a place and a voice in this urban space is encapsulated in the contrast between the institutionally opposed satellite dish on the one hand, and on the other hand the politically sanctioned hipsters, middle-class art consumers, and tourists walking in the neighbourhood as a new and instantly recognizable visual presence. The project of WOW does not contribute to the institutional opposition to the dishes – after all, “edginess” is vital for a creative incubator – but the insertion of a globally oriented gentrification aesthetic shifts the dominant aesthetic of the neighbourhood. So while the look of the dishes is not expunged materially, the difference with the other side of the street has the effect that gentrification is displacing the aesthetics-as-politics of the area.
Note

All translations from Dutch by the author.

Works Cited


About the Author

**Daan Wesselman** is a Lecturer in Literary and Cultural Analysis at the University of Amsterdam and a researcher affiliated with the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis. His research revolves around material-discursive interfaces between the body, the city, and everyday life, seeking to methodologically bridge the humanities and urban studies through a focus on concepts like heterotopia, the right to the city, and the posthuman. Recently, he co-edited – with Simon Ferdinand and Irina Souch – the volume *Heterotopia and Globalisation in the Twenty-First Century* (Routledge, 2020).