



The Neverending Park



Museum Hof van Busleyden
Mechelen

6 december 2019
tot 15 maart 2020

Breaking New Ground with *The Ground of Things* and *The Neverending Park* **A theatre and a museum drive a bottom-up dynamic**

What is *The Ground of Things*?

The Ground of Things is an urban project, run by the ARSENAAL/LAZARUS Theatre and the Hof van Busleyden Museum, calling on all Mechelen residents to become actively involved in shaping their community's future. The city has made available 20,000 square metres to implement a number of suggestions, starting in 2021. The Mechelaars themselves negotiate what they want on the shared ground and why. The project also seeks to identify a way in which to involve more closely those citizens who wish in their city's future development: contributive democracy.

What is *The Neverending Park*?

The Neverending Park is an important phase of the project *The Ground of Things*. This temporary underground park in Museum Hof van Busleyden opened on 6 December, 2019. With the visitors' involvement, it seeks to answer the question 'What is the ground of things?' What do we need nowadays in order to live together? What do we want to achieve on 20,000 square metres of shared ground? It is a large-scale, low threshold urban workshop, with wonderful scenography by Jozef Wouters and Benjamin Verdonck.

To draw the visitor into unexpected encounters, residents of the park include the project's initiator Willy Thomas, Einat Tuchman, Ann Meskens, Elly van Eeghem, Farbod Fathinejadfard and Simon Allemeersch. Over the 15-week period, each week tackles a different subject related to the proposals submitted. The common thread and overarching theme is 'deciding together'.

What does the park's programme look like?

- On Monday, we work with schools on the overarching theme.
- On Tuesday there are there will be discussions around the table on existing frameworks of reference: religion, the constitution, human rights, SDGs, artists' manifestos and so on.
- Wednesday is the museum's closing day.
- On Thursday, we organise an adapted version of our successful *Soirées Carrés*, a town hall style event where city councillors are invited to explain the policy relating to that week's subject. That will be followed by a debate with opposing views, from well-known writers and thinkers on the subject. Not a hostile debate, but constructive dissent.
- Friday includes encounters with people from the sector.
- On Saturday the park residents give a brief 15-minute presentation summing up what has already been done on that week's subject. Then those who submitted proposals, and experts, visitors, artists and officials from the city's different services will discuss the merits of the proposals. The criteria applied in our earlier major round of negotiation will once again be considered and further refined. In the last week of the exhibition (mid-March 2020), there is the final negotiation of what the Mechelaars want to do on the ground allocated to them.
- On Sunday with low threshold park activities, with the help of various Mechelen organisations.

How does a contemporary project about land or ground ownership, an exercise in contributory democracy, fit with a museum and theatre context? Why do a theatre and a museum collaborate?

This unusual cooperation between the ARSENAAL/LAZARUS theatre and the Museum Hof van Busleyden sprang from similar views on their respective places and roles in society. Both the museum and the theatre want their work to tie into the existing multi-layered and complex urban fabric. *The Ground of Things* is an answer to how a cultural institution can contribute to society in transition, create space for dialogue and new encounters, and challenge the town and all its inhabitants to join in the process.

In the museum, that re-opened in 2018, *The Ground of Things* was given a room in the permanent display. It was deliberately located in the same section as the history rooms about the power strategies and the humanist world-view. The artworks in the history section tell the story of arranged marriages, shrewd alliances or success in war, which all helped build such a large empire. And of the establishment of centralised institutions, such as the Great Council, which was a way of carving out greater independence. Hieronymus van Busleyden, our host, made his Hof van Busleyden into a place where people were brought together. Desiderius Erasmus and Thomas More were among guests who shaped his powerful networks. The many objects, books and paintings on display often acted as a starting point for discussion.

The museum room dedicated to *The Ground of Things* contemporises these Burgundian themes. It makes them tangible. By giving each visitor one virtual square metre of ground, strategies for how to use ground held in common and the commitment this involves acquire concrete significance. Using video clips, models, drawings or mood-boards, inhabitants of Mechelen put forward their ideas, and thus convey in images or words what does not yet exist, what might be possible. The suggestions, just as in Hieronymus's time, trigger reflection and discussion with the host on duty.

This journey is an exploration both of the relationship between a cultural institution and a town or city and of how, together, a museum and a theatre can design and shape an exhibition. The ultimate aim is to have a negotiated selection of projects, to redefine the public interest, starting from a shared involvement, and structurally securing this form of contributory democracy in partnership with the town.

What motivates the Museum Hof van Busleyden is its desire to stimulate a dynamic whereby the museum is not just a place where people, objects and stories are statically displayed, but one which acts as a bridge between the community and those stories, objects and people. As a theatre, with this project ARSENAAL/LAZARUS wants to reprise its historic role as a forum. The cooperation seeks to guarantee a haven for the multi-vocal polyphony and complexity of modern society. As an independent arts organisation, the theatre creates more freedom for the city museum. In turn, its partnership with the museum means the theatre has an opportunity to help shape the town from the inside. As a result, both analyse how they can enhance their cultural roles as facilitators and driving forces of and in their town. But, like the shaping of the town itself, this is and will remain a work in progress.

More information on www.theneverendingpark.be