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Constructing the ideal body: health, sporting space and the new Dutch City

My paper today represents the first thoughts from new research. Today's talk is conceptual and experimental in nature, and relates to the role of sporting space and the sporting body in the Netherlands around 1900. I would like to acknowledge my own apprehension as a historian in this experiment and the difficulty you may face as an audience in being part of it.

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With this proviso out of the way, this experiment is influenced by ideas from Foucault and Dutch historian Auke Van der Woud. The concept is that sporting activity was the physical representation of a radically new urban culture in the Netherlands around 1900, which focused on the perfectible body, mass culture, materialism, and observation. Discourses and concepts of health became central to questions of urban life in the late 19th century and were an integral part of the new culture.

I'll sketch how these discourses became important in Amsterdam from 1850 onwards before focusing on the issue of sporting space in the city. I should say from the start, that I am sceptical and unsure of how sport functions in the world today. This colours my historical experiment.

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Part I – Unhealthy Amsterdam

In the 1850s and 60s, sanitary conditions in Amsterdam were widely regarded as appalling.

The canals, which had served the city well during its 17th century Golden Age, had developed into mass communal dumping grounds. In 1864, newly appointed city engineer Van Niftrik noted how frozen canals were covered with faecal matter and enormous piles of waste. In summer, these disappeared into the waters to turn the canals into foul-smelling open sewers. These sewers were also drinking fountains for many Amsterdammers. And beyond the smell, many cases of typhus and malaria occurred and devastating cholera outbreaks occurred between 1830 and 1866.

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Despite the smell and epidemics, until the late 19th century public health was not a prime motivator for urban change. Research into disease rarely turned into action. Discussions about health were taken up by well-meaning hygienists and entrepreneurial individuals looking for profit. Private hospitals and clinics were established to supplement the limited municipal provision. Entrepreneurial doctor, Samuel Sarphati, attempted to provide clean water, cheap bread and green spaces; his efforts were often stymied by a lack of finance or political interest.

In 1865, Amsterdam received its first large-scale park. This Vondelpark was financed by private money as a place for all Amsterdammers to relax in fresh air, away from their increasingly arduous working conditions. Chief investor CP Van Eegen saw the park as 'a garden for the gardenless'. But it was more about fears of social revolt than concerns for health. Private money meant that those behind the park could construct it with their values without the need for any discussion. It was a public space, but one behind private fences.

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The municipality did not ideologically oppose green space. In 1866, City engineer Van Niftrik chastened by his experiences developed this ambitious plan for the city. However, political arguments, and financial uncertainties turned ambition to practicality. After a decade with no resolution, city architect Kalf developed a much more pragmatic plan in 1877 which revolved on private landowners and builders.

Most large open spaces and the speculative social and health benefits were cut in favour of the financial certainty of housing. Before the 1880s, lines between public and private were firmly in place. The old-liberal attitude held by those in charge of Amsterdam believed that the free market would solve all ills: it was not the city's job to interfere.

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Part II – The New Culture

Towards the end of the 19th century, this began to change. Central to this change was what historian Van de Woud has described as a cultural revolution – a clash between old civilisation and new culture. While old cultures were closed, uniform, certain and aristocratic, the new cultures were open, pluriform, visible, materialistic and revolved around the masses. The new culture was based on experience, on the testable and, measurable and influenced by changes in natural science. In Van de Woud's words, the body was discovered; it was as something that needed to be weighed, measured and observed. The idea of the observable body is something that is also central to Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*.

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Concepts of health changed from a marginalised discourse to a dominant one. New medical technologies emerged in Amsterdam that cemented the place of the body in society.

Quoting Foucault, Annet Mooij has noted that the ‘clinic was born’. And as Foucault has outlined, space is never neutral; it ‘is fundamental in any exercise of power’. So redesigning space redesigned how power operated. Municipal hospitals were radically reformed and became spaces to observe, teach and train: to construct new knowledge. Private individuals and religious groups developed their own institutions and clinics were used by all parts of society. As this blueprint for the new Municipal hospital shows, space was given its own purpose, its own coding and regulation. The body was processed and observed on an intimate level.

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Between 1870 and 1900, the population of Amsterdam nearly doubled on the back of economic opportunity and improving mortality rates. The increase in people made the discussions about of health and hygiene more pressing. The municipality initiated cleaning operations. Urban planning and space became intimately tied to ideas of health. In 1901, the Housing Law and Public Health Law gave municipalities a direct obligation to ensure housing met minimum health standards with state subsidies available. Urban expansion plans needed to consider how health would be impacted by new developments. Indicators suggest from 1860 that death rates lowered; epidemics stopped by 1870. But with increased attention to the health, citizens were also intimately inspected and observed. Everything was measured and noted; houses, families, behaviours and bodies. The healthy body was a clean body, a moral body and increasingly an exercised body.

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Part III – Sport, the body and urban space

This increase in the centrality of the body is shown in the development of spaces and activities. An increase in swimming baths and wash houses shows the idea of the clean body was for all sectors of society. Gymnastic exercise was an ordered way to develop physical health, popular with schools, authorities and urban associations.

From the mid-19th century competitive physical exercise gained more importance in Amsterdam. In the 1840s and 50s so-called ‘English sport’ started to emerge, with first rowing, sailing and equestrian past-times. Around the 1880s, cricket and later football became more popular. Around the 1900, participation in sporting activities slowly became more wide-spread.

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In Amsterdam, the *Algemeen Olympia Vereeniging* was established in 1883 to promote the opportunity for the young to exercise as part of an all-round education. I would suggest that to this organisation and an increasing number in society, the sporting body was the ideal body of the new culture: fit, trainable, measurable, disciplined and visible.

With the support of the municipality, the *Algemeen Olympia Vereeniging* was given rent-free access to a large plot of land to develop sporting and physical recreation. At the same time, a private sporting business, the Amsterdam Sport Club, was given access to another part of the land. This business with links to leading political families developed mass spectator events such as horseracing, ice-skating, athletics and cycling. The map behind me shows the race track, cycle track and a cricket pitch. With such events came a range of paraphernalia: competitions, stands, betting, restaurants, shops and entertainment. Mass sporting events allowed the athletic body to be observed, measured and consumed; the body was just one more ‘thing’ in the new materialist culture.

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Throughout the 1890s and early 1900s, debates about the role of sport were often framed using the discourses of health. Critics of sport sometimes noted that competitive sport was dangerous as it caused over-exertion and could lead to serious health problems, especially for women. On a few occasions, the press reported serious injuries, even death, resulting from rough football matches, or members of the public being hit by cricket balls. Those on bicycles were seen as a danger because of their speed and ill manners. Yet, sporting authorities and influential supporters increasingly emphasised the health benefits of different sports and the positive influence it had on the youth of the country.

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Finding space was difficult in the urban landscape. Before the 1890s, many played on open ground with few facilities. Parks were often retrofitted, as was the case with the Vondelpark here. Towards the end of the century, dedicated space was built in new parks planned by the municipality. In 1891, the expansion to the Oosterpark saw a large pitch for football and cricket laid. On the other side of the city, the Westerpark also included sporting space. Sport had become part of the accepted urban discourse and part of the need to control space. An article from 1897, reported that the municipality had banned use of the pitches in the parks for sport. Sporting space was part of the exercise of power.

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Often space was rented from private owners with an interest in sport. This occurred in Oud-Roosenburg just outside the city. Here a horseracing track gave way to football pitches around 1905. As sport increased in popularity, its importance to the new culture grew. New sporting equipment became part of the new materialist culture. It became part of the new mass culture of shopping which expanded in the busy streets of the capital with its new glass-fronted stores. Just like a ball, boot or bat, functional space became another thing that was needed in the new materialist culture.

If the sporting body was the ideal body of the new culture, then the new mass sporting stadium was the ideal space. In 1911, the stands at the Oud-Roosenburg ground collapsed before a game. This prompted call for a new ground. Something that would be suitable for a city of Amsterdam's standing and would also help 'discipline some of the spectators'. Such a stadium, it was said, would promote a healthy balance between body and mind amongst all citizens.

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In 1914, a new mass stadium was opened on an undeveloped piece of land to the south of the city. It was financed by private individuals who were part of the Amsterdam political, financial and business elite. It indicated that boundaries between private and public were no longer really meaningful.

The new mass stadium operated on a practical and symbolic level. In the new materialist culture of things, it represented ambition, achievement and the triumph of the new. But it also helped mould those who used it – space after all is not neutral. As those who selected the winning design for the stadium noted, it was ‘sober, yet civilised, and of fitting character.’ A comment on the stadium, but also on their intentions for those who were to use it. This stadium provided urban planners and politicians with ways to reproduce discourses of order and regulation in the city, to shape and observe – and to do so in a voluntary, seemingly joyful healthy space. Space was measured and segmented for different uses, for the media, for businesses, for players and different spectators.

The stadium allowed materialistic consumerism to be reproduced. Refreshment stalls and adverts lined the streets around the stadium. It allowed for mass observation of bodies, not only of players, but of the referee and of each other. The new mass stadium was somewhere where everyone could be seen and measured by it for their sporting prowess, their behaviour or any number of actions. Sporting space enveloped the body on all sides and from within with the new culture.

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The body was central to the new culture around 1900 and ideas of promoting health became a dominant discourse in Amsterdam. Aligned with increases in life expectancy and medical knowledge came new techniques of observation in all aspects of daily life, from the hospital to the home. Sporting space became a key way to reproduce this. Sport allowed the individual, all individuals, to be measured, observed, consumed, regulated and trained as part of a healthy normal daily life. The increased need for sporting space was linked to the new culture's need for the visible body, for materialism and for a more minute level of observation. It culminated in the birth of the mass spectator stadium.

It seems to me that sport can be seen to encapsulate the new modernist corporal culture. It is joyful, exuberant and healthy but also constraining, segregating, and intimately-observed. In the city health does not come without increased observation, measurement and subtle control. As I noted at the start, I am sceptical and unsure of what sport does to us in modern society. I worry that its benefits are mirages that disguise more sinister aspects. That its spaces restrict and segregate. Most of all, I worry that the healthy body, the sporting body, masks a plethora of non-corporal ills in the visible modern city.

Thank you.