

Roundabouts

Traffic Roundabouts
as a Context for Art

VLAAMS BOUWMEESTER

MERCATORFONDS

The countryside along a route may be a considerable ornament to a military road, provided it is well maintained and cultivated, and full of villas and inns, and plenty of attractions; with views now of the sea, now of mountains, now of lakes, rivers or springs, now of a parched rock or plain, and now of groves and valleys. If the road is neither steep or tortuous, nor obstructed, but rolling as it were, level, and quite clear, it will also be an ornament. ... Moreover, if the traveler often comes upon objects that stimulate conversation, especially if it is about high matters, that is an ornament of

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Guy Châtel and Kris Coremans

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The authors are associate members of the design team ssa/xx and are also affiliated with the Department of Architecture and Urban Planning at the University of Ghent.



Jacques Tati, still from *Play Time* (1967)
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Ornaments on Roundabouts*

In the penultimate scene of the film Play Time (1967), the climax of Jacques Tati's modernist ballet mécanique, we are shown a traffic roundabout as a merry-go-round. To the sound of a jolly fairground tune, a colourful assortment of vehicles circle around neatly laid-out shrubbery. The conical mound has been planted in the form of a star with low hedging and flowerbeds, the culmination of which is a red and white lollipop, a cylindrical spiral that provides a final flourish. Everything stands still when a taxi is hailed. Then a coin is inserted into a parking meter and the whole thing starts again.

In Flanders, where any innovation is viewed with suspicion before being adopted with complete abandon, traffic roundabouts caught on only in the 1990s. In the shortest possible space of time, a large proportion of the road system's junctions

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were replaced by circular traffic islands. At a stroke, this reduced the complicated traffic situation at a crossroads to a simple matter: a compulsory system that presented drivers with a manageable series of simple actions. Traffic flow was improved by roundabouts: their capacity was noticeably greater than that of the old-fashioned crossroads. The annoyance of having to wait at traffic lights, as well as sudden braking and abrupt gear changes, now seemed to be things of the past. With roundabouts, traffic seems to regulate itself.

Recommendations in Respect of the Construction of Traffic Roundabouts (Aanbeveling inzake de aanleg van verkeerspleinen), a memorandum by the Vereniging van Vlaamse Steden en Gemeenten (Association of Flemish Cities and Municipalities) dating from 1993, determined that traffic safety demanded two important requirements of roundabouts. Firstly, they had to be visible and recognisable from a reasonable distance so that drivers could adjust their driving in time. Secondly, care had to be taken to prevent drivers from assuming that the road beyond continued uninterruptedly, so measures should be taken to make it impossible for them to see through or over roundabouts. The document emphasised the important role that the central island played in this respect: “The central island is, as it were, the core of the traffic roundabout ...” This is followed by advice as to its construction, which had to improve visibility and recognisability from a distance, and also to stimulate the flow of traffic, by raising the central island and adding plants, signposts, flagpoles, a work of art, a light mast, etc.

The four-lane road taking us out of town heads towards a roundabout. Flashing red arrows warn of the bend. We are driving a little too fast. The sudden deceleration causes us to sway slightly. For an instant I feel the grip of the safety belt across my left shoulder. We can now merge into the flow of traffic effortlessly and follow it as it circulates. Reflectors, yellow light cones and a throng of traffic-flow signs pass by on the left-hand side. Scraps of greenery droop dejectedly amid the signage. With a quick turn to the right, we move away from this frenetic and congested mass. From here onwards, the N43 adopts a wide profile: one lane for each destination and an ample central reservation. We drive in a column towards Kortrijk. The parking lane alongside the road is virtually empty. Here and there it provides room for vehicles preparing to exit. Scrawny trees line the central reservation and the hard shoulder that



Photo Guy Châtel



Photo Guy Châtel

shields the cycling path. The sluggish rhythm of our progress is marked by a succession of black lampposts. Until recently, the N43 at this point was a broad, pitted and patched up piece of tarmac, its continuous central lane a constant invitation to reckless driving. Apart from motorcyclists, to whom acquiescent motorists give right of way, nobody yet makes any attempt to overtake the vehicle in front.

Traffic conditions determine the type and size of roundabouts, their diameter being calculated by correlating speed with turning circles. But this traffic-defined approach leaves indeterminate the central island thus created.

Traffic roundabouts are managed by the Agentschap Wegen en Verkeer (Roads and Traffic Agency), the primary concern of which is, of course, to implement technical specifications. Therefore, as far as the central island is concerned, this involves the creation of a visual obstruction that functions simultaneously as a signal. However, the memorandum of recommendations, which was strictly followed at the time, betrays the traffic planners' unease in respect of the indeterminate nature of this central island—the roundabout's *core*. In order to overcome the imminent scandal of this indeterminacy, the problematic task of designing the island was entrusted to another body, the Afdeling Bos en Groen van de Administratie Milieu-, Natuur-, Land- en Waterbeheer (Forestry and Green Spaces Department within the Administration for Environmental, Nature, Land and Water Management), presently included in the Agentschap voor Natuur en Bos (Nature and Forestry Agency). The chief task of this body is to advise municipalities on the creation of green spaces, but it also acts as a specialist design office for the Flemish community's provincial services. Their designers provided new objectives with which roundabouts had to comply. As conscientious designers, they sought to translate a location's condition into spatial terms. By their nature, designs that concentrate on visibility and recognition pull out all visual stops. As a result, the simple precondition to make the roundabout identifiable ultimately determined the appearance of the entire site. Due to their emphatically visual presence, roundabouts reconfigure their surroundings; wherever they are implemented, they transform the landscape. In Flanders' closely woven network of roads they have become a unique system of visual signs.



Photo Guy Châtel



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The section of highway from Ghent to Kortrijk, which crosses the territory of Sint-Martens-Latem and lies between the triple intersection in Sint-Denijs-Westrem and the junction with the N437 in Deurle, was completely renovated in the second half of the 1990s. The construction of traffic roundabouts at the junctions concerned was part of an integrated programme focused on calming traffic flow. The two roundabouts are set 4.5 kilometres apart. In the spring of 1997, trees and climbers were planted and completed with the use of ornamentation. A noteworthy construction of tubular metal was erected on each of the central islands; the one at the Sint-Denijs roundabout was painted bright yellow, while its counterpart in Deurle was painted bright blue. Apart from this sharp contrast of colours, both features were identical. The ornamentation consisted of a number of separate elements, each of which had been turned at an angle to the others. Each element was composed of three flat sections formed by parallel tubes that looked rather like fences. The arrangement of the curves suggested that a globe could have rested snugly on top of them.

The system of highways built under Austrian rule as part of a military infrastructure connects all the major towns in the region, a fact that has enabled it to play a leading role in the economic development of the region. Without too many modifications having to be made, the system was able to cope with increasing motorised traffic and thus serves to transport a considerable volume of the region's people and goods.

When preference was given to establishing a strong localised motorway system, the road network underwent a marked change. The majority of municipalities through which the motorway ran were provided with their own access points to the system. Over the course of time, use of the original infrastructure of urban roads changed drastically as a result. In particular, roads that had been duplicated by the route of the motorway switched almost completely to local use.

Phenomena such as the movement away from urban areas, and the official promotion of ribbon developments, have affected the use, appearance and nature of highways still more. In the interim, a considerable number of people in the region now live in detached houses somewhere in the country or in houses lining the network of peripheral roads. The mesh of a close-knit but well structured fabric that constituted the pattern of settlement in Flanders is being increasingly filled in. In a short space of time, the distinct system of towns and villages has



Photo Niels Donckers

been disrupted by expansion and encroachment. What remains of the original structure has become invisible from the road network because of ribbon development. A semi-urban agglomeration spreads out across a considerable part of the region, in which the urban centres appear as little more than local concentrations.

Significantly, concentrations can now occur anywhere: they could just as well be at a junction within the infrastructure as in or surrounding the old urban centres. However, the areas of concentration can now be clearly seen as specialised. While the historic cities perpetuate their existence chiefly as elegant shopping centres and open-air museums, businesses that depend on an extensive client base are seeking other sites in which to locate. Accessibility and plentiful parking facilities are usually the deciding factors in that choice. In a system in which the location decided on by one company can determine the decision of another, many locations alongside the highways have become very popular. They offer neo-urbanites everything they need to furnish their homes, to beautify their gardens, to maintain their cars and clothe their bodies, and to entertain themselves.

The renovation of an old highway between two monumental signs may be seen as the completion of a transformation that occurred spontaneously. The ornaments have the organizing effect of a symmetrical chimneypiece: they accentuate what they frame by clearly marking its boundaries. The use of identical objects whose complementary colours obviously refer to one another stresses the unity of the system. Here, the highway was laid out as somewhere in between a country lane and a city avenue. It endeavours to counteract isotropism and to propagate identity. The distinguishing component can now be read as an entity; it could be given a name. In this way it places itself at the disposal of the businesses that have located there. Although their location is determined chiefly as a result of technical and commercial considerations, they clearly benefit from a recognisable situation. The avenue strip acts as a main street in the nebular town. However, the identity that it develops is one of a hybrid: at once a shopping centre, a recreational area and a traffic junction.

In Flanders, little emphasis has ever been placed on aims to keep urbanisation under control. It evolves as if a natural phenomenon, its selective growth



Photo Niels Donckers

governed by displacement and ascendancy. The *Master Plan for Flanders* now presents a framework for the sustainable development of the region. The postulated principles are to concentrate and consolidate areas of settlement and to preserve open spaces. Although most of those involved subscribe to these aims, planning and actual building practice rarely seem to agree on these matters. Principles frequently disappear from view when specific interests are at stake. Unregulated operations, immediate private interests, and a policy that can be bluntly described as ‘doing favours for each other’ ultimately tend towards the same outcome: the mutation of the former constellation of centres into a nebulous urban sprawl. The adaptation of the traffic infrastructure focuses primarily on safety and improving traffic flow, but has the same result. Juggling with the infrastructure aims to optimise its performance in a spatial fabric that is the joint product of private initiatives and pragmatic policies. While it solves traffic-related issues, urban development carries on unchecked. The network of roundabouts distributed across the region has had a marked result in that regard. It has placed the emphasis on the principle of urban nebular expansion. In reality, spatial transformation is driven by mobility. Urbanisation that in all other respects is piecemeal grafts itself mainly onto the road system. The roundabouts consolidate this unregulated urbanisation by emphasising its innate points of articulation.

The strip's segmentation follows a dual pattern: "... the obvious visual order of the street layout and the troublesome visual order of the buildings and signs. The zone on the highway is one of shared order. The zone next to the highway is an individual order. The elements on the highway are civic. The buildings and signs are private. In combination they embrace continuity and discontinuity, stopping and starting, clarity and ambiguity, cooperation and competition, the community and naked individualism. The highway system brings order to sensitive exit and access functions, as well as to the image of the strip as a coherent, interconnected entity. It also creates places in which individual businesses can grow and governs the general direction of that growth. It allows variety and change along its sides and provides room for the contrapuntal, competitive order of individual enterprises."

(R. Venturi, D. Scott Brown and S. Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, London, 1972, p. 20)



Photo Niels Donckers

Embellishment is intended to convey added value to the public infrastructure. It is practised as a way to invest communal property with the semblance of dignity and elegance. The designers who put this into practice uninhibitedly seek out possible solutions in harmony with the morphological language of private buildings. This does not mean to say that embellishment simply became part and parcel of the sometimes garish aspect of that language. It opts for mediation and attempts to alleviate tension and stifle conflict. It is as if it wished to tone down garishness and to civilise extravagance. With its willingness to please, it expands the scope of the morphological language employed in the private domain. What it accomplishes in the visual register is in fact what the roundabout achieves in terms of traffic: it makes wastefulness easier. Nevertheless, embellishment is no more a true urban-development strategy than is the technical improvement of the infrastructure. Its programme is too vague for that, and, on balance, it is implemented too ineffectually. All things considered, it is a tactic that unashamedly puts itself at the disposal of the region's exploitation.

Thus by means of embellishment, and beyond the regulation of traffic and access to business or residential locations, the public infrastructure also accommodates design. Embellishment inclines towards unification and attempts to achieve coherence in its setting. However, it will be fully understood that the ambivalence of the unity achieved can be embodied most simply by means of a minimal or frivolous form. This means that the ornamentation placed on the roundabouts can be interpreted only as spatial objects. Their sole sophistication lies in an explicit focus on kinetic perception. Their form is determined by the fact that we can see these things only when we are in motion, and driving around them. However, our perception results in a stereotypical experience in this instance. Embellishment accomplishes the apparently absurd or impossible: it makes distraction, emptiness or absence monumental.

The ornamentation of the N43 was removed after a few years. The administrative departments responsible got tired of repeatedly having to repair or replace the art works. When standing in position during the course of 1997 and 1998, there were regular collisions. A crashed car would often form part of the roundabout's ornamentation for hours at a time. The press lost no opportunity in pointing out all of the deficiencies of the traffic roundabout concerned. Above all, though, the incidents were



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the subject of countless debates. Jokes were made about the traffic merry-go-round, about the inability to tame the beast. The antithesis expressed by the presence of entangled wreckage on a roundabout that should have ushered in traffic calming did not go unnoticed. At times the focus was firmly on the desecrating nature of a union that had yielded only debris. Some interpreted the accidents as a metaphor for the threat posed by traffic to the city centres; for the straggling urban centres beset by the periphery; for ancient kinship, an interdependency, whose only means of expression was now to be found in destruction.

All of the items pertaining to traffic signs, initially employed to protect the art works and now forming part of the roundabout itself, cannot prevent the central islands from still being frequently damaged due to drivers either dozing off at the wheel or driving too fast.

*Beauty may even influence an enemy, by restraining his anger and so preventing the work from being violated. Thus I might be so bold to state: No other means is as effective in protecting a work from damage and human injury as is dignity and grace of form. (L.B. Alberti, *De re aedificatoria*, Book VI, Chap. 2; translated by J. Rykwert, N. Leach & R. Tavernor in *Leon Battista Alberti, On the Art of Building*, Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1988, p. 156)*

