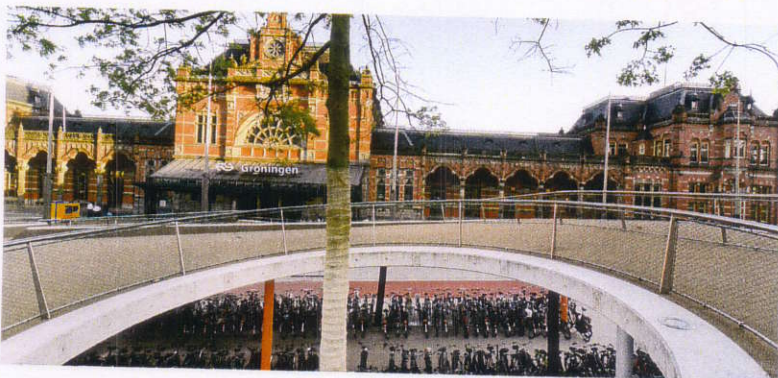




The forecourt of Groningen Station is pierced by holes that are encircled by oversized steel seats. Lighting is embedded in the surface.



Rob 't Hart (2)

The holes visually link the spaces above and below. Beneath the surface is parking for 4,000 bicycles.

Bike park in Groningen, The Netherlands

Groningen is a city that collects contemporary projects. A trip around town reveals something like a zoo, with examples of all design languages of the last twenty years, many of them now aging and distinctly past their prime. Even though some of these projects are outdated, this collection not only demonstrates a commitment to design (even occasionally lacking in judgment) but also serves an archival function: we can consult the Groningen Zoo of Design to determine the design preoccupations of the past and how those often theoretical interests (since most of the work by these designers was not built) manifested themselves in material

form on the ground. It is in this lineage of collected projects that we can regard the latest project by KCAP as an artefact illustrating the preoccupations of designers at the turn of the millennium: the “fetishisation” of transport infrastructure and the displacement of the ground. The project comprising a “city balcony”, as the designers call it, is the forecourt of the renovated historic Groningen Station building. It is an artificial surface that flares up to form angled wings at each end, on the front right and back left corners respectively. Beneath the surface is parking for 4,000 bicycles, linked to a bike path running along the forecourt,

parallel to the station. Innovative structural systems were researched by Ove Arup engineers in collaboration with ETH Zurich to develop a forest of slim columns that stops the project from being too heavy and creates a delicate complexity underground. Other transport functions such as busses and taxis are at the end of the forecourt. The surface is kept open, pierced by holes that visually link the spaces above and below, and allow trees to grow through the deck. The holes are encircled by oversized steel seats that double as handrails. The deck's finish is fine pebble-crete. The lighting embedded in the surface and along the edges deliberately emphasizes the distortion and artificiality of the deck.

The forecourt (or “balcony”) is opaque and calm, an uncluttered surface for pedestrians, but clearly referring to transport in the historic typology of the railway station, which it respects. While the surface on top is calm, there is a hive of activity from the bikes below. Cyclists enter and exit at each end, running along the width of the plaza.

Rather than show everything happening in the way of transport, the project provides snippets or carefully sequenced views through windows to the activity below. The surface is used as a device, a foil that not only shows the active program but also precisely controls how it will be shown. It has simplicity and restraint but reveals moments of great complexity. If Groningen is a project zoo, then what can we say about this new addition? Whereas many of the other projects, particularly from the 1980s, treat the city as a space for their own display, this project is simply an infrastructural solution. Its ambitions are as much concerned with function and urban effectiveness as with formal qualities, which are nonetheless distinctive and do not labour its functional agenda. This is a very Dutch project, using the functional and the logical as a springboard to demonstrate a somewhat skewed take on it. This does what infrastructure should: make a civic gesture with qualities that open up possibilities for other uses of the city.

Julian Raxworthy

Groningen Station Area, The Netherlands

Client: City of Groningen

Architects: KCAP, Han van den Born, Kees Christiaanse, Ruurd Gietema, Irma van Oort, Rotterdam

Construction: 2003 – 2006