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Urban Culture and Public Space

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The death of public space on Beukenplein 2008-2026.

Ten years after Van der Wilk's study, how has the gradual decline of public benches and enclosure of café terraces on Beukenplein reshaped the public presence of non-consumptive users?

“Het ooit zo lelijke Beukenplein is zo onderhand een van de lekkerste/ leukste/ gezelligste/ knapste horecapleinen van Amsterdam-Oost geworden. Met restaurants, koffiezaken en nieuwe borrelplekken die als paddenstoelen de grond uit schieten” one blogger noted in 2024.¹ This description captures the new identity of Beukenplein, a small square in Amsterdam east. Today, the Beukenplein is a hub for food and drinks, but this is a result of a large transformation. Once a car-dominated parking street with red benches on each corner overlooking the road and parking spaces. The square underwent a major transformation in 2014. GroenLinks published a plan to turn Beukenplein from a “traffic square” into a “living square” by removing 28 parking spots, adding greenery, and creating a community feel.² This aligned with a broader 2001 vision to revitalize squares in Oosterparkbuurt-Zuid.³

However, as Van der Wilk observed in her 2016 dissertation, the well-intended redesign had an unintended consequence: public space such as the infamous red benches were gradually replaced by café terraces.⁴ Van der Wilk documented how this shift, part of state-led gentrification, resulted in the displacement of primarily working-class users from the square⁵. My research builds on Van der Wilk’s findings by examining the current state of Beukenplein and reviewing these changes a full decade later, asking: Ten years after Van der Wilk’s study, how has the gradual decline of public benches and enclosure of café terraces on Beukenplein reshaped the public presence of non-consumptive users? ⁶ I will test this by fieldwork observation and theory, to review in what ways the space is (intended to be) used. For this analysis I will draw from the concepts; the death of public space by Bodnar and social agoraphobia by Mitchell.

To research the square I did fieldwork observation, consulted the Amsterdamse Stadsarchief, and used google maps for data about the history of the square. To visualize the Beukenplein and its transformation, I created 2 maps that illustrate the facilities before and after the transformation (figure 1).

To assess the current possibilities for non-consumptive users and to compare them with the situation in previous years, Google Maps proved to be a particularly valuable research tool, especially the Street View function, which enables users to navigate through

¹ Barnhoorn and Barnhoorn “6 x Beukenplein in Amsterdam-Oost.”

² GroenLinks Amsterdam Oost, “Beukenplein wordt groen en duurzaam verblijfsplein”

³ GroenLinks Amsterdam Oost, “Beukenplein wordt groen en duurzaam verblijfsplein”

⁴ Van der Wilk, “Van wie is het plein?” 11.

⁵ Van der Wilk, “Van wie is het plein?” 14.

⁶ Van der Wilk, “Van wie is het plein?” 11,14

streets as if walking along them. Luckily, the Street View imagery is updated approximately every two years, providing data as far back as 2008. From that point onward, I was able to analyze the yearly changes in the landscape of Beukenplein.

Beukenplein 2008-2026

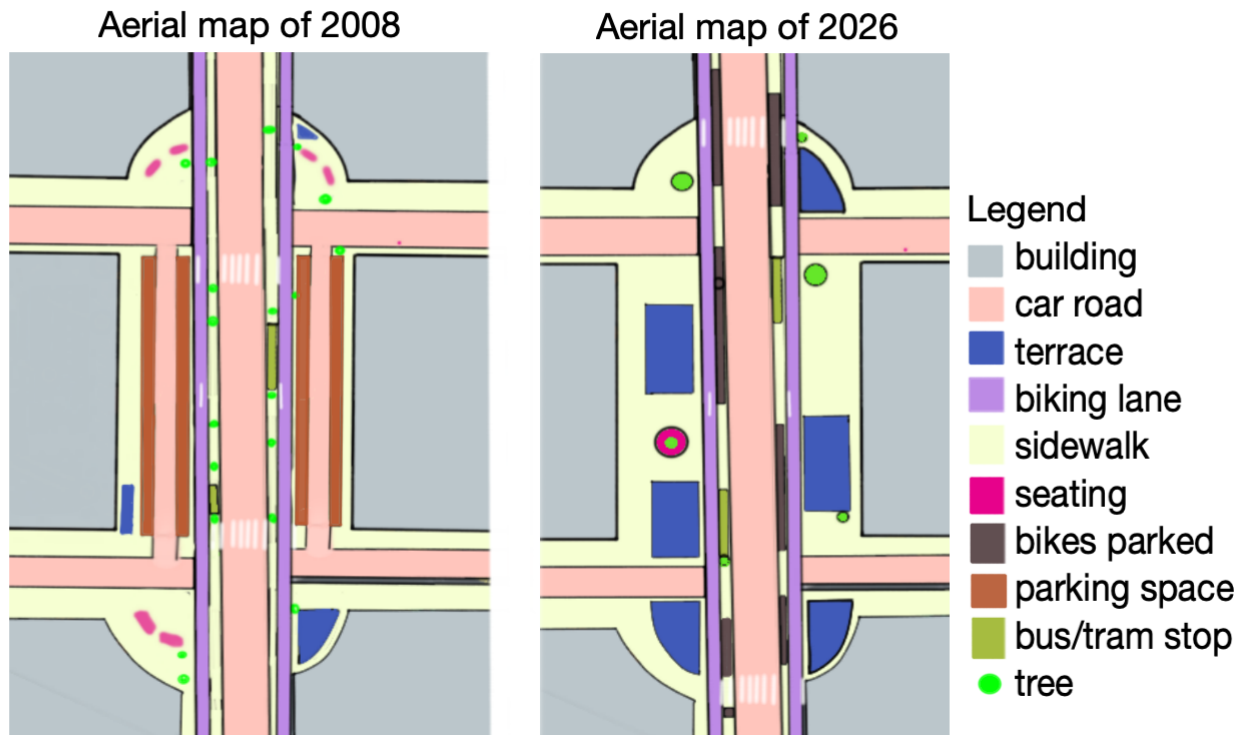


Figure 1: Map of Beukenplein in 2008 and 2026. The information about the layout in 2008 was drawn from Google Street View, the layout of 2026 was based on fieldwork observation. Map by author.

To visualize these changes, I captured three screenshots taken in 2008, 2015 (immediately after the renovation), and 2024. In 2008, there were 2 red benches next to a tree in front of the shops, the benches were located in the corners of the square, giving a panoramic overview of the Beukenplein (figure 1 and 2). In 2015, just after the renovation of the Beukenplein, the red benches made place for tables for costumers of the ice cream shop. In 2024 the same shop is seen, this time with a wind screens around the tables, protecting them on one side. Now, in 2026, the windshield is closed off to the street on both sides, completely shutting it off from the street.

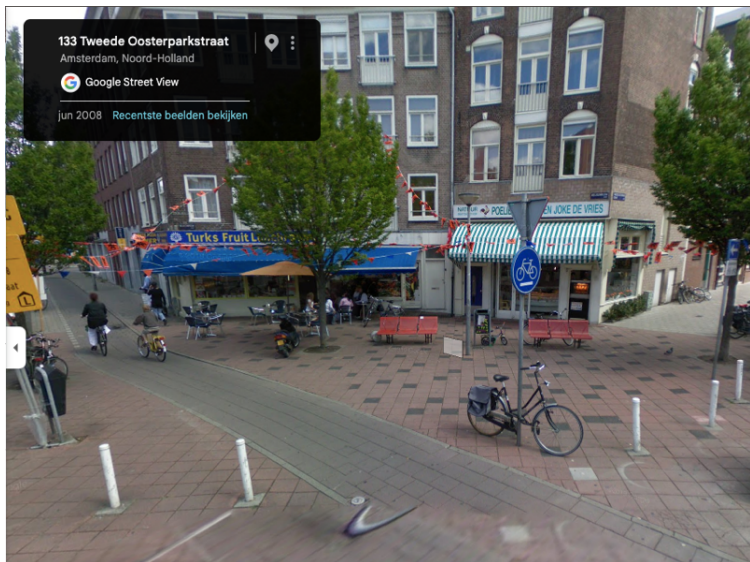


Figure 2: Google Street View of 133 Tweede Oosterparkstraat in June 2008. Screenshot by author.

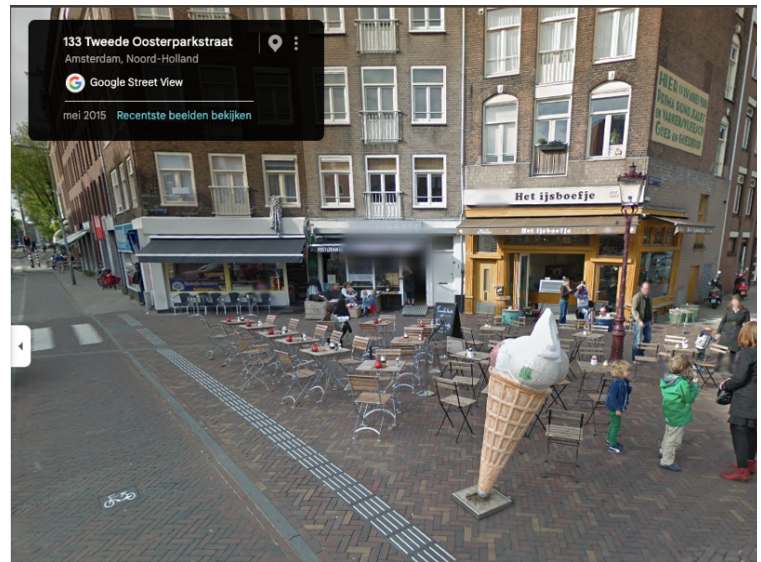


Figure 3: Google Street View of 133 Tweede Oosterparkstraat in May 2015. Screenshot by author.

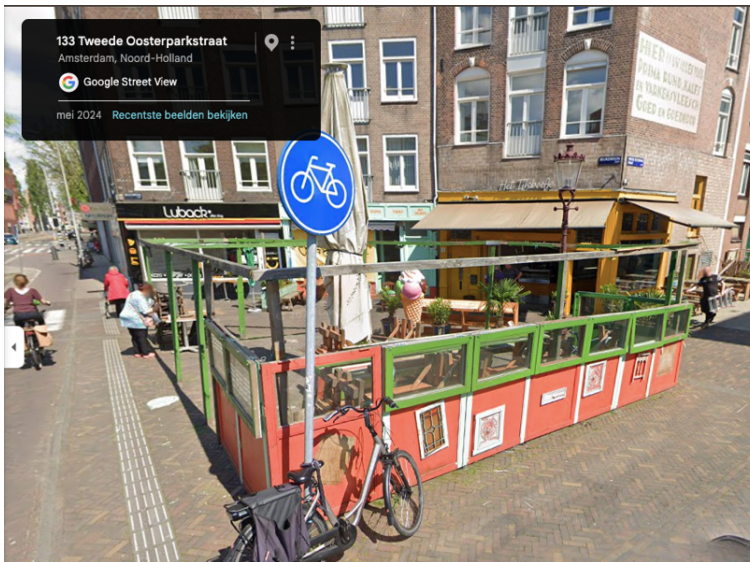


Figure 2: Google Street View of 133 Tweede Oosterparkstraat in May 2024. Screenshot by author.



Figure 3: View of 133 Tweede Oosterparkstraat, May 20 2026. Photo by Author.

The most notable finding of my research conducted using Google Street View and fieldwork observation, is that the square did not become more open, green, or accessible over time; rather, it progressively deteriorated. Whereas the earlier benches could be used by anyone, regardless of whether they were a customer, the tables are now owned by the shops. In 2015, the space remained open: even though the tables were already shop-owned, people could walk between the tables and sit down briefly to tie a shoe or rest. Due to the installation of wind screens, the space has become entirely enclosed, a trend also seen in several other corners of the square. Every terrace now features the same windshields, completely isolating

the area from the street. Consequently, the square no longer conveys the open, social character that GroenLinks envisioned in their plans.⁷

This is a textbook example of what Bodnar calls graduated publicness, the square has deteriorated along a spectrum from a public space of unmediated encounter toward a managed landscape of consumption, where your right to sit is now determined by your consumption behavior.⁸ These design strategies like removing the benches explicitly exclude marginalized groups, as privately owned public spaces exclude non-consumers.⁹

Among the parties profiting from the remodeling of Beukenplein, according to Van der Wilk, are the owners of nearby cafés and shops. She notes that previously, the square's red benches attracted loitering youth, which troubled local business owners; one café owner she interviews explains that after the benches were removed, young people stopped hanging around his terrace, a change his customers greatly preferred.¹⁰ This dynamic aligns closely with Bodnar's argument that primarily middle-class citizens became increasingly concerned with the perceived spread of disapproved behaviors disrupting everyday life.¹¹ For these consumers, the goal is to feel safe and comfortable in public spaces, and to avoid the uncomfortable confrontation of a polarizing city.¹²

It is important to note that while the renovation saw the removal of all the red benches, it did introduce two new seating areas: circular benches built around a central tree, located in the middle of the square (figure 6). Though these benches may have been well intentioned, they are ultimately a downgrade from the original six red benches, which not only offered a comfortable place to sit, complete with back support, a trash can, and a tree, but also afforded a panoramic view of the square from the corners. Their replacement with poorly supported, centrally located seating makes clear they were not designed for lingering.



Figure 4: One of the new benches on the Beukenplein. Photo by author

⁷ GroenLinks "Beukenplein wordt groen en duurzaam verblijfsplein"

⁸ Bodnar, "Reclaiming public space" 2095, 2099.

⁹ Bodnar, "Reclaiming public space" 2096, 2100.

¹⁰ Van der Wilk, "Van wie is het plein?" 144.

¹¹ Bodnar, "Reclaiming public space" 2092.

¹² Bodnar, "Reclaiming public space" 2096.

Mitchell would argue that this removal of benches and expansion of terraces is not neutral design but rather an ideological project driven by social agoraphobia to drive away the loitering youth.¹³ The terraces with wind screens project an image of safety and order while excluding those who cannot or will not consume, exemplifying what Van der Wilk identified as "stacked displacement."¹⁴ Ultimately, the transformation of Beukenplein from benches to terraces reflects the dominance of exchange value over use value, restricting the right to appropriate space, to sit without consuming, to gather in groups, to simply linger. The new benches should be located where there is a proper overview of the square and out of the way of the flow of traffic.

Ten years after Van der Wilk's study, this paper set out to answer how the gradual enclosure of terraces and the decline of public benches on Beukenplein reshaped the spatial possibilities and public presence of non-consumptive users. Through the Google Street View analysis showing data from 2008 until 2024 and fieldwork observation in 2026, I show that the redesign of Beukenplein did not simply replace parking spots with greenery, as GroenLinks envisioned, but gradually replaced public seating with privatized, enclosed terraces, demanding consumption. The seating possibilities for non-consumptive users have declined: where six red benches once offered panoramic, comfortable, and freely accessible places to sit, now only two poorly supported, centrally located benches remain. Meanwhile, every terrace has been enclosed with wind screens, marking what is public space and what is not. A significant change from the open space that Beukenplein used to be until 2015 (figure 3). This decline confirms and extends Van der Wilk's thesis of "stacked displacement." What she observed in 2016 as the beginning of bench removal has, by 2026, matured into fully private spaces in Bodnar's terms.

However, my research question was not sufficiently answered in one respect: I documented that non-consumptive users are excluded, but not whether residents actually prefer this. Van der Wilk's interviewed café owner welcomed the changes, but what do elderly residents, teenagers, or parents with small children think? Future research should therefore conduct qualitative interviews and surveys with diverse Beukenplein users (including non-consumers) to assess whether the square fits the needs of the neighborhood, as Henri Lefebvre's right to the city would demand. the transformation of Beukenplein from benches to enclosed terraces reflects the prioritizing of profit over public use. To reclaim the square as

¹³ Mitchell "Against Safety, Against Security" 61-71.

¹⁴ Van der Wilk, "Van wie is het plein?" 72-3, 105.

truly public, future redesigns should locate new benches at the corners and remove or lower windshields to restore the open feel of the square.

Following Henri Lefebvre's concept of the right to the city, the square should be designed not to serve capitalist corporate interests, but to meet the needs of Oosterparkstraat residents and their right to simply exist in public space without consuming.

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