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Van Hasselt, L.

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GENTLEMAN ACTIVIST: PIET VAN EEGHEN AS A DRIVING FORCE OF SOCIAL CHANGE IN 19TH CENTURY AMSTERDAM

by Laura VAN HASSELT
Postdoctoral researcher and lecturer in history
History department
University of Amsterdam

L'activisme et les intérêts des affaires sont souvent vus comme contradictoires. Le marchand banquier mennonite Piet Van Eeghen est une exception notable, dans l'Amsterdam du XIXe siècle. Il a combiné des idéaux sociaux et des motifs commerciaux, la philanthropie et le capitalisme. Le Vondelpark d'Amsterdam est un de ses legs les plus visibles, mais il a été aussi un pionnier en matière de santé publique et de logement social, tout en cofondant plusieurs musées.

Piet van Eeghen (1816-1889) would probably have regarded most of today's activists as rather vulgar in their visibility[1]. The Mennonite merchant-banker, who lived in one of Amsterdam's finest canal houses, preferred to remain behind the scenes while discreetly working on his social projects. Mobilizing the media was not his style, let alone publicly challenging vested interests; as a successful businessman and banker, he was very much part of the local establishment himself. Van Eeghen & Co[2] was one of the oldest and most respected merchant houses in Amsterdam at the time, but it did substantially profit from colonial trade. This was not frowned upon in 19th century Amsterdam. Still, the family business could hardly be seen as an example of social entrepreneurship, let alone activism.

And yet, referring to the basic definition of an activist, Van Eeghen may well be classified as one. An activist, according to the *Oxford Learner's Dictionary*, is "a person who works to achieve political or social change, especially as a member of an organisation with particular aims"[3]. Of course no activist is alike, and there are many more complex definitions[4]. But this basic description fits Van Eeghen like a glove, and it helps us look beyond the classic framework of philanthropy. In the

[1] This article is largely based on my dissertation: L. van Hasselt, *Geld, geloof en goede vrienden. Piet van Eeghen en de metamorfose van Amsterdam, 1816-1889*, Amsterdam, Balans, 2023. This was the first monograph about him.

[2] The company was founded in the 17th century and still exists at the time of writing, although its focus now lies on vitamins and food supplements. Its archives are kept at the Amsterdam City Archives (Stadsarchief Amsterdam, SAA), SAA 447.

[3] *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary:* https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/activist (consulted 26 November 2024).

[4] See for an historical overview J. D. Atkinson, "The Study of Social Activism", *Journey into Social Activism: Qualitative Approaches*, vol. 3, n° 26, 2017, p. 3-26.

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definition of Charles Harvey, Mairi Maclean and Roy Suddaby, philanthropy is "voluntary giving by households or corporate bodies to promote charitable causes, projects, and organizations"[5]. However, what Van Eeghen did was not just giving, although he did that too. He was primarily someone who acted. From the 1840s until his death in 1889, Van Eeghen continuously strove for social change as a founding member and co-funder of various organisations with the aim of ameliorating life in the city of Amsterdam. These two roles in his life, businessman and "activist", were formally separate – if not always in practice. Neither were Van Eeghen's social projects fully without commercial interest. This makes the case of Van Eeghen all the more interesting. To what extent was he able to combine the roles of activist and businessman? The history of Van Eeghen's social initiatives highlights how the ideals, abilities, and networks which enabled his activism were inextricably intertwined with his economic activities on a personal level. And although he formally separated civic and economic activities, his business practice informed the way he shaped his activism.

Van Eeghen was a value-driven entrepreneur, inspired by religion at a moment when the social state was underdeveloped. As such, he is an example of a broader trend in the 19th century[6]. Van Eeghen's "private organizations with public purposes" are related to those elsewhere in Europe and in the United States[7]. But in the city of Amsterdam, he was unique in the diversity and scale of his civic projects, and in the effectiveness with which he used his business and family networks to make these a success. The scope of Van Eeghen's civic initiatives was limited in the sense that their aims were confined to the city of Amsterdam. But within those geographical limits, his social projects were remarkably ambitious. The topics ranged from public healthcare to the construction of a spacious city park, from the "rescue" of prostitutes to the introduction of social housing. On a cultural level, Van Eeghen was also a key player in the establishment of some of Amsterdam's most well-known museums: the Rijksmuseum (1885) and, posthumously, the Stedelijk Museum (1895) and the Amsterdam Historical Museum (1926)[8].

In this article, I will explore the entanglement of business interests and social commitment in Van Eeghen's two most groundbreaking civic initiatives. The first is the Association for the Benefit of the Working Class (Vereeniging ten Behoeve der Arbeidersklasse), which was the first social housing organization in the Netherlands (1852). The second is the Association for the Construction of a Riding and Walking Park (Vereeniging tot Aanleg van een Rij- en Wandelpark), founded in 1864, which resulted in Amsterdam's famous Vondelpark. This article, like my dissertation, is primarily based on extensive research in Van Eeghen's private archives and the archives of these two societies[9]. The case of Van Eeghen shows us how businessmen can be activists at the same time, in completely different fields, while effectively combining networks and

[5] C. Harvey, M. Maclean, R. Suddaby, "Historical Perspectives on Entrepreneurship and Philanthropy", *Business History Review*, vol. 93, n° 3, 2019, p. 443-471.

[6] T. Adam, *Buying respectability. Philanthropy and urban society in transnational perspective, 1840s to 1930s*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2009; N. Bermeo and P. Nord (eds.), *Civil society before democracy: lessons from nineteenth-century Europe*, Lanham, Rowman and Littlefield, 2000. For the Dutch strong tradition in civil society, including its democratic risks, see R. Aerts, "Civil society or democracy? A Dutch paradox", *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review*, vol. 125, n° 2-3, 2010, p. 209-236.

[7] C. Calhoun, "The imperative to reduce suffering. Charity, progress, and emergencies in the field of humanitarian action", in M. Barnett and T.G. Weiss (eds.), *Humanitarianism in question. Politics, power, ethics*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2012, p. 79.

[8] L. van Hasselt, "Introduction", in Piet van Eeghen's Collection of Paintings, Amsterdam Museum, 2024, p. 8-15, online: https://www.amsterdammuseum.nl/publicaties/de-schilderijencollectie-van-piet-van-eeghen/89949

[9] SAA 1224 (family archive); SAA 297 (VAK); SAA 352 (Vondelpark).

making use of both their status as successful businessmen and their commercial expertise.

AN UNEASY COMBINATION

Activism and business interests are often seen as contradictory. Simply put: "doing good" costs money, which otherwise could have ended up in the bank accounts of the company's managers or shareholders. Or, more positively framed, this money could have been invested in the improvement of the company. Therefore, substantial social or environmental improvements in business policies are often, at least partly, the result of outsider activism. However, it is important not to generalize in these matters. Framing activism and business interests as intrinsically contradictory obscures the fact that the aim for social and environmental change has historically also come from within businesses: in some cases from the work floor, in others even from company leaders. Reversely, NGO's may have substantial economic interests, as shown in the works of Matthew Hilton, Kevin O'Sullivan and others[10].

In recent literature on the history of social and environmental activism, the traditional opposition between businessmen and activists has been challenged[11]. Harvard business historian Geoffrey Jones, for instance, gives inspiring examples of activist company leaders in *Deeply Responsible Business. A Global History of Values-Driven Leadership* (2023)[12]. These entrepreneurs from different ages were driven by social ideals, intertwining personal values and company activities. Some of these "values-driven" leaders were strongly motivated by their religious beliefs, just like Van Eeghen. An eminent example is British Quaker and chocolate maker George Cadbury (1839-1922), who played an important role in bringing about social reform in late 19th century England. He is particularly well known for establishing Bournville, a model village for – primarily – his workers and their families[13].

Van Eeghen belonged to a related protestant minority: the Mennonites[14]. They were anti-militarist, just like the Quakers, and social responsibility was also deeply ingrained in their belief. The Mennonites had only received equal citizen rights in the Netherlands in 1796, so they were hardly present in public administration. Yet the Amsterdam Mennonites were influential in other ways: ever since the 17th century they had been successful traders, known both for their wealth and their charity[15]. According to his tax statements, Piet Van Eeghen and his wife Cato Huidekoper must have belonged to the richest citizens in the Netherlands in the latter half of the 19th century[16]. As genteel Mennonites they were

[10] See for instance M. Hilton, J. Mckay, N. Crowson, J.-F. Mouhot, *The politics of expertise*: *How NGOs shaped Modern Britain*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013; K. O'Sullivan, *The NGO Moment: The Globalization of Compassion from Biafra to Live Aid*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2021.

[11] See H. Berghoff and A. Rome (eds.), *Green Capitalism? Business and the Environment in the Twentieth Century*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017; A. G. Kirk, *Counterculture Green: The Whole Earth Catalog and American Environmentalism*, Lawrence, University Press of Kansas, 2007; J. C. Davis, *From Head Shops to Whole Foods: The Rise and Fall of Activist Entrepreneurs*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2017; K. Sluyterman, "Corporate Social Responsibility of Dutch entrepreneurs in the Twentieth Century", *Enterprise & Society*, vol. 13, n° 2, 2012, p. 313-349.

[12] G. Jones, *Deeply Responsible Business: A Global History of Values-Driven Leadership*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2023.

[13] *Ibid*., p. 26-33.

[14] C. Krahn, M. Gingerich, O. Harms (eds.), *The Mennonite Encyclopedia. A Comprehensive Reference Work on the Anabaptist-Mennonite Movement*, vol. 2, Scottdale, Herald Press, 1972, p. 160.

[15] M. W. Sprunger, "Why the Rich Got Mennonite. Church Membership, Status and Wealth in Golden Age Amsterdam", *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, n° 27, 2009, p. 41-59.

[16] J. Moes, *Onder aristocraten. Over hegemonie, welstand en aanzien van adel, patriciaat en andere notabelen in Nederland, 1848-1914*, Hilversum, Uitgeverij Verloren, 2012, p. 300 and Appendix II, p. 319-320.

careful not to flaunt their prosperity[17], but Van Eeghen did own a large collection of romantic paintings[18] and two grand mansions (one in Amsterdam and a summer manor in the east of the Netherlands). And while the family company did not employ many people, Van Eeghen's domestic staff was relatively large.

Apart from the obvious differences regarding country, line of work and religion, there is another disparity between Cadbury and Van Eeghen. Cadbury's social reform was closely related to his own company (he improved the living conditions of his own workers), whereas Van Eeghen's "activism" was outside the realm of the family firm. In this sense he is more closely related to the famous American philanthropist Andrew Carnegie, about whom Philip Cochran writes: "Although early capitalists such as Andrew Carnegie were renowned philanthropists, their charitable activities were pursued as individuals and not on behalf of corporations"[19]. Like Carnegie, Van Eeghen's efforts to achieve social reforms were not directly related to his company and in some respects even sharply contrasted with it. On a personal level, however, the two were never quite separate.

SOCIAL HOUSING WITH LIMITED PROFIT

Perhaps it all started with Napoleon. The French occupation of the Netherlands, which had ended in 1813, had left Amsterdam deeply in debt. Its once famous harbour had come to a near standstill and the city's population had shrunk to 185 000 people. There was mass unemployment; roughly half of the population lived in poverty in slums. This was the Amsterdam Van Eeghen grew up in. He was born in 1816, one year after the Kingdom of the Netherlands was proclaimed. From the 1850s, a tentative economic restoration became visible and the city's population started to grow again. This did not, however, improve housing conditions for the masses. On the contrary: in the absence of housing regulations, the slums got more and more crowded as migrants moved to Amsterdam looking for work. Cramped and mouldy basement houses, lacking ventilation or sanitation, were no exception.

This was a far cry from the living conditions of the Amsterdam elite. Yet Van Eeghen in his canal house was well informed about the poverty of his fellow citizens. This was mainly thanks to his role on the board of the Nursing Association (Vereeniging voor Ziekenverpleging, VvZ), the first civic initiative in which he was involved[20]. This association trained and paid for protestant nurses, who provided free healthcare in the homes of both the Amsterdam poor and the elite. Because of Van Eeghen's frequent contact with physicians on the board, he started to realize that there was a vital connection between living conditions, hygiene and public health. A deadly cholera epidemic in 1848-1849 strengthened this conviction. Furthermore, like many of his contemporaries Van Eeghen related housing conditions to inner civilization. This line of thought was concisely summarized by the British architect George Godwin: "As the house, so the people"[21]. According to 19th century social reformers such as Godwin and Van Eeghen, decent housing was a prerequisite

[17] Piet Visser described the reputation and ideal of the wealthy Mennonists in the Netherlands at the time as "simple gentility". P. Visser, "Eenvoudige deftigheid. Het ideaal en imago van beschaving bij de doopsgezinden in de eerste helft van de negentiende eeuw", *Doopsgezinde bijdragen*, vol. 38, 2012, p. 61-88.

[18] After his death he bequeathed his art collection to the city. It is now part of the Amsterdam Museum collection.

[19] P. L. Cochran, "The evolution of corporate social responsibility", *Business Horizons*, vol. 50, n° 6, 2007, p. 450.

[20] Van Eeghen was one of its founders in 1843. President was the physician and hygienist J. P. Heije (1809-1876). The archive of the Nursing Association is kept at the Amsterdam City Archives, SAA 30117.

[21] G. Godwin, *Another Blow for Life. On sanitary conditions among the poor of the metropolis*, London, H. Allen & Co, 1864, p. 89.

to raise decent citizens. This implied a form of social responsibility, both individually and as a company.

Van Eeghen's first plans to start a social housing association date from 1848, the European Revolution Year. The origin of this association shows the importance of his business and social networks, which were largely interwoven. He started out with two allies from his innermost circle: Cato's father Pieter Huidekoper (1798-1852) and his cousin Jan van Eeghen (1816-1865). Huidekoper was not only Van Eeghen's father-in-law, but also the first Mennonite mayor of Amsterdam (from 1842 until 1849). Needless to say, this opened many doors for Van Eeghen. Thanks to his marriage, it was easy for him to contact anyone in the municipality if this was useful for one of his civic initiatives. And cousin Jan van Eeghen was Piet's partner in the management of Van Eeghen & Co. Through Jan's support, the family firm was involved in the workers' housing project from the start, if not officially. It was also clear from the start that Piet van Eeghen would take the lead in the association and Jan would focus more on the family firm. He became a shareholder of the association, but not a board member like Piet.

The third ally was Hendrik Jacob Koenen (1809-1874), the city's first alderman for "public works". Van Eeghen wrote Koenen a letter in September 1848 about the housing situation in Amsterdam. He expressed his concern about the "immensely inflated" private rents which came at the expense of clothing and healthy nourishment of destitute Amsterdammers. Not without paternalism, Van Eeghen emphasized "how stuffy and damp chambers give rise to all sorts of maladies, to the healthy staying away from home, and how in small dwellings immoral cohabitation becomes a hotbed of so many terrible sins"[22]. Therefore, he sought the alderman's support to establish a housing association for proper and affordable workers' dwellings. This is the first record of what was to become the Association for the Benefit of the Working Class (Vereeniging ten Behoeve van der Arbeidersklasse, VAK)[23].

Koenen enthusiastically supported Van Eeghen's initiative. He did so, however, not in his official function as alderman, but as a private person. This way of operating was not uncommon in 19th century Amsterdam: local government did little to meet the needs of its citizens and was exceedingly reluctant to take up new responsibilities. Contrastingly, in their spare time, many city councillors and aldermen were active members and generous donors of civic initiatives. This was also true of most mayors. They weren't principally averse to improving the living conditions of their fellow townsmen, as long as there was no obligation for the local government to act, let alone to raise taxes. That was a matter of principle. This form of *laissez-faire* was widely accepted by the Amsterdam elite. Van Eeghen fully supported this conservative view of government responsibility. In a time of limited democracy he believed in the strength of private initiative, not in strengthening public administration[24].

The preparations took several years. In 1852 Van Eeghen had finally amassed enough support to found the Association for the Benefit of the Working Class. Its aim was to build decent, affordable housing in Amsterdam, to rent out to "proper" working class families. Such a housing association based on ideals was new to the Netherlands, but Van Eeghen had not invented the concept. In all his civic initiatives, he first looked for successful precedents elsewhere in Europe. In this case his primary examples were in London: the Metropolitan Association for Improving the

[22] Allard Pierson (University of Amsterdam), Réveil Archive, Koenen Collection, RAAV268, Letter of C. P. van Eeghen to H. J. Koenen, 27 September 1848.

[23] SAA 297, VAK archive.

[24] For an overview of the development of social liberalism in 19th century Netherlands, see: S. Dudink, *Deugdzaam liberalisme. Sociaal-liberalisme in Nederland 1870-1901,* Amsterdam, IISG, 1997.

Dwellings of the Industrious Classes (1841) and the Society for Improving the Conditions of the Labouring Classes (1844). London was ahead of Amsterdam as a modern city in many respects. The British capital was notorious for its "Dickensian" slums, but it had also become frontrunner in the movement for social housing in 19th century Europe.

Like its British counterparts, the VAK in Amsterdam was a mixture of capitalism and philanthropy. It was activist in the sense that it strove for social change. The association was privately funded by shareholders whose profit was limited, so they "gave away" the option of getting higher profits on their money elsewhere. It was based on the British "five per cent philanthropy" model, in which investment returns were maximized to five per cent[25]. The Amsterdam organization started even stricter than the London societies, by setting a maximum of only three per cent. Van Eeghen, who took the role of treasurer upon himself, thus managed to keep tenants' rents affordable and to reserve funds for new construction. At the same time, he thought it was essential for the success of the association that members/shareholders should not lose any money in its support. The VAK was no charity. Indeed making a modest profit was deemed vital to keep investors enthusiastic and to continue the project in the long run. Thus in practice only the better paid workers could afford to pay the VAK rents.

Still, this new type of housing was revolutionary. The association's sober but elegant apartment blocks on Smalle Pad (1856) set a new standard for workers' dwellings. The brand new street near the former city wall was proudly nicknamed "Working Class Versailles"[26]. Even more famous was the Willemsstraat (1857), a complete renewal of the previously notorious Goudsbloemgracht in one of the poorest parts of Amsterdam. In this former slum Van Eeghen and friends closely cooperated with the city council, which filled up the stagnant canal, whilst the VAK built its modern housing blocks alongside the new street. Between 1852 and 1900, the VAK realized about 780 apartments in Amsterdam, mostly in the Jordaan neighbourhood.

In 1868, sixteen years after the establishment of the VAK, the board let go of the three per cent principle[27]. The minutes state that this maximum was no longer necessary to ensure the continuation of the association. Needless to say, the shareholders did not object, but the underlying ideals did not disappear. The quality of the buildings remained high and rents stayed relatively low, compared to those of purely commercial builders. Meanwhile, Van Eeghen also set up a second housing association called Concordia (1864), with which he demolished slums and built workers' dwellings specifically in the Jordaan area. As opposed to the VAK, which was an association, this was a limited company. Many of its shareholders were relatives of Van Eeghen[28]. At VAK, he had learned the "trade" of social housing. Concordia was more of a business venture, but here too, profits were voluntarily limited.

Van Eeghen remained on the board of both VAK and Concordia all his life, but these organisations were not officially related to his work as merchant-banker. On paper, these roles were separate. Yet on a personal level, there were many connections between Van Eeghen's official work and his social entrepreneurship. In the 1850s, when the VAK was established and built its first housing blocks, Van Eeghen & Co. invested in a shipping company and developed a lively trade in tobacco and other lucrative goods from the Dutch Indies. The firm never traded in people, but it evidently profited from colonialism,

[25] J. N. Tarn, *Five per cent philanthropy. An account of housing in urban areas 1840-1914*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1973.

[26] The street was later renamed Planciusstraat.

[27] SAA 297, inv. n° 33. Letter of the Board, 6 July 1868.

[28] SAA 668, inv. n° 1: Act of establishment Bouwmaatschappij Concordia.

both in the East and in the West. The painful contrast with the investment in social housing in Amsterdam could hardly be greater. At the same time, it was impossible to untangle the different networks.

Many of the VAK's shareholders and board members came from Van Eeghen's business network. First of all there was Jan van Eeghen, Piet's co-director at the family firm. One of the other founders was Josua van Eik (1803-1878), another wealthy Mennonite businessman. He was a tea merchant, who already owned a few buildings in the city. These three men must have met countless times at the Amsterdam stock exchange, but also socially and in church. In the Amsterdam City Council the VAK found its most enthusiastic supporter in Anthony van Bosse (1806-1875), who knew Van Eeghen as a colleague in insurance and international trade. Then there was co-founder Jan Messchert van Vollenhoven (1812-1881), who would become mayor of Amsterdam in 1858. This lawyer came from a well-known Amsterdam family of brewers. All these Amsterdam business families knew each other intimately. Whenever Van Eeghen paid a social visit, asking for support for one of his social projects, it was hard to refuse. His position became even stronger after he was appointed commissioner at the Dutch National Bank in 1859. Ideals aside, Van Eeghen was someone one strategically wanted to keep as a friend. His strong business network gave him the perfect basis for a crowdfunder.

Following the examples of VAK and Concordia, several other social housing associations were founded both in Amsterdam and elsewhere in the Netherlands. Private housing associations such as Van Eeghen's could not nearly keep up with the growing population, but they did set an important example. Towards the end of the century, the local government stepped in and in the first half of the 20th century, when social democrats dominated municipal government, Amsterdam became internationally known as the "Mecca of Public Housing"[29]. However, the roots of the Amsterdam social housing tradition lie in the private initiative of Van Eeghen and his friends.

A PRIVATE PARK WITH ACCESS FOR ALL

In 1864 Van Eeghen was promoted to president of the board of the Dutch National Bank, a prestigious position he could easily combine with his work at Van Eeghen & Co[30]. It reflected his status in the Amsterdam financial elite, which further facilitated his role as driving force behind civic initiatives. In the same year, he started the Association for the Construction of a Riding and Walking Park in Amsterdam[31]. Again Van Eeghen was inspired by examples elsewhere in Europe, such as Hyde Park in London and Bois de Boulogne in Paris. The 19th century saw a boom of city parks everywhere in Europe. But the physical situation in the Dutch capital was complicated. Because of its peat soil, Amsterdam did not have any natural woodlands which could be transformed into a public park. There were only a few patches of green, which were dwindling from the 1850s as the city started to expand. To create a park, Van Eeghen had to start from scratch.

Why a park, as he was a busy man as partner in Van Eeghen & Co., at DNB and with his several existing civic initiatives? Not to mention the fact that he and Cato had twelve children, three of whom died at a young age. Just as in social housing, health concerns for his fellow citizens were at the base of Van Eeghen's park association. Public parks were seen as the "lungs" of the modern city, necessary to bring fresh air in a built

[29] V. Stissi, *Amsterdam, het mekka van de volkshuisvesting. Sociale woningbouw 1909-1942*, Rotterdam, 010, 2007.
[30] National Archives of the Netherlands, Board minutes of the Dutch National Bank, NA 2.25.77.02, 3.394-3.397.
[31] SAA 352.

environment which was getting rapidly more crowded and polluted. This argument was both charitable and economic. As landscape historian Sonia Dümpelmann pointed out, the elite's enthusiasm for parks was partly – but not solely – fuelled by the pragmatic motive that a healthy workforce would eventually benefit the economy. Also in the interest of the economy, a grand public park was seen as an indispensable attraction for modern tourists in a time of "civic boosterism"[32]. In Amsterdam, there was yet another economic argument to build a park. The stench of the canals was notorious during the summer. Wealthy families such as Van Eeghen and Huidekoper would flee the city to their country houses, where there was fresh air in abundance. They would stay there for months, leaving their offices in Amsterdam all but deserted. From 1860, the Van Eeghen family spent their summers in a beautiful manor in Oosterbeek[33], a rural village in the east of the Netherlands. An attractive city park, where one could breathe fresh air whilst taking a leisurely stroll, would not keep the urban elite from their country homes, but it might persuade them to stay in town for at least part of the summer.

Van Eeghen started his park project in 1863. First of all, he quietly assembled a sum of 40 000 guilders to buy a large piece of land at the south-west edge of the city, just outside one of the old city gates (Leidsepoort). This is where he envisioned his park. At this early stage, he did not seek any publicity. What he did seek was a group of trustworthy co-financiers to secure the land. Just as when he started the social housing project, he first resorted to those he knew best: family and business associates. Investor in the park project from the very beginning was Jan van Eeghen, his cousin and partner in the family firm. He again heartily supported the project but did not take up a position on the board. This was their division of tasks outside the daily work at Van Eeghen & Co.: Piet was given room to devote a substantial part of his time to his social projects, whereas Jan was vice-president of the Chamber of Commerce and member of the Provincial Council. All these activities strengthened their network and the general reputation of the family firm. Together they made a strong team[34].

Piet van Eeghen managed day to day operations of the park association. Formally though, he was only vice-president. His friend Messchert van Vollenhoven was strategically given the title of president of the association, since he was now mayor of Amsterdam. He stipulated that he only accepted this honorary title as a private citizen of Amsterdam, not in his official capacity. This was to be private enterprise; there would be no government subsidy for the park. Still, in accepting this position the mayor underlined the importance of the project and greatly facilitated talks with the municipality, whenever necessary. Amongst the other board members were tea trader Josua van Eik, who was also still involved in the VAK, and several bankers: Carl Becker (1820-1897), E. J. Everwijn Lange (1831-1908) and another cousin of Van Eeghen's, David Rahusen (1823-1883). Van Eeghen's network paid off again.

Once Van Eeghen had assured the land where he wanted to build his park, he asked the most prestigious Dutch landscape designers of that time if they would be interested in creating the park. Jan David Zocher Jr. and his son Louis Paul Zocher agreed to take the task upon them. Only then, when these essential conditions were met, the park founders went public. In January 1864 they printed a circular (4,000 copies), in which they announced their

[32] S. Dümpelmann, *A Cultural History of Gardens in the Age of Empire*, New York, Bloomsbury, 2016, p. 20-21.

[33] The house was named de Pietersberg.

[34] Jan van Eeghen died at an early age in 1865. His son and successor Samuel Pieter van Eeghen (1853-1934) would become one of the most prominent Amsterdammers of his time. J. de Vries, "Samuel Pieter van Eeghen, Toewan Amsterdam", in H. Beliën, M. Bossenbroek, G. J. van Setten (eds.), *In de vaart der volken. Nederlanders rond 1900*, Amsterdam, Bert Bakker, 1998, p. 116.

plans. They appealed to local pride: how could it be that even the small neighbouring town of Haarlem had a beautiful park and Amsterdam, the Dutch capital, did not? In the same circular they emphasized that a large city park was by no means an elitist hobby: "For those who can spend a large part of the summer outside of Amsterdam, this need [for a city park – lvh] may be less strong. [..] But all the more do those workers, whose labour takes more and more effort, need such a place to go for a stroll, a place of recreation"[35].

The new park was to be privately funded, for "the effort may be greater, but the freedom of action is retained"[36]. Therefore, the founding circular was also the start of a fund raising campaign. As such it was an instant success. The prospect of a large park for all had instant appeal. Within a few months, the board received more than 83 000 guilders in donations (converted more than a million euros). Van Eeghen and Messchert van Vollenhoven privately donated the largest sums (3 000 and 4 000 guilders respectively) but the park had many supporters from the start: 938 donors, this first round. Construction started immediately and within one and a half years, the first part of the park could be opened. Thousands of people came to the festive opening ceremony of the park. The Dutch newspaper *Algemeen Handelsblad* proudly wrote: "Amsterdam too, now has its Bois de Boulogne"[37]. This was rather exaggerated, seen as the park only measured 24 acres at the opening in 1865. But in the context of 19th century Amsterdam it was huge.

The final park was to be seventy acres, so there was still a long way to go for Van Eeghen and friends. It took twelve years and several other crowdfunding actions to complete the park, which was finally finished in 1877. After the first call for donations, more money was needed but less was given. This laid bare one of the shortcomings of philanthropy as opposed to state initiatives: who would ensure the continuation of the project after a successful start? There now *was* a park, if not very big, so the urgency to donate was not felt as strongly anymore. Thus the park association struggled with a constant shortage of money. From time to time, one of the members suggested introducing a small entrance fee for walking park visitors or toll for carriages, to bring in some extra money. But Van Eeghen consistently refused any suggestion of the sort: entrance to the park had to remain free for all as a matter of principle. Instead, he brought his entrepreneurial spirit to the table[38].

The board found another way to finance the expansion of the park: land speculation. Here again Van Eeghen made good use of his experience as an entrepreneur, including his knowledge of the Amsterdam housing market. Right from the beginning, the park association had bought several plots of land around the edges of the meadows which were designed to once become part of the park. They donated a small strip of these to the municipality, in exchange for the promise to build new streets bordering the eventual park. Here Van Eeghen's excellent relations with the mayor came in handy. The board subsequently sold the rest of the land to contractors, with substantial profit. These contractors were willing to invest in those muddy meadows, as they realized housing prices would spectacularly rise in this area once the park would be finished. As stated in the articles of association,

[35] "Voor hen die des zomers buiten Amsterdam geruimen tijd kunnen doorbrengen, moge deze behoefte minder sterk zijn [...] Maar nog veel meer behoeven zij die na den hoe langer hoe meer inspanning vereischenden arbeid ook eenige uitspanning wenschen te genieten, dergelijke wandelplaats". First circular Park Committee, 12 January 1864.

[36] "De inspanning moge groter zijn, de vrijheid van handelen blijft behouden". First circular Park Committee 12, January 1864.

[37] *Algemeen Handelsblad,* 14 June 1865: https://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:010139824:mpeg21:a0033 (consulted 27 November 2024).

[38] Van Eeghen stated that to introduce an entrance fee would "forever spoil" the park ideal. SAA 352, inv. n° 59, Vondelpark. Verslag 1864-1892, p. 41.

all profits from the land sale had to be used for the construction, maintenance or expansion of the park[39].

With hindsight it was a small risk to take. In a city this crowded and polluted, who of the wealthy would not be prepared to pay some more so they could live right next to a luscious park? But at the time, none of the board members could be sure the park would eventually be finished. Therefore, conditions for the sale of land were strict and elitist. Van Eeghen was a great advocate of decent housing for workers, but not here. The building of workers' dwellings was even explicitly forbidden on these plots. Nor were workshops, factories, taverns, gaming houses and other "institutes of public amusement" allowed. Furthermore, contractors had to promise to implement a sewage system, which was still a novelty in Amsterdam. All these conditions were meant to create an exclusive, posh new neighbourhood – the modern equivalent to the canal belt.

It worked out as planned. The stately Vondelstraat and P.C. Hooftstraat, which border the park, were built on lands which originally belonged to the park association. They are still amongst the most expensive streets of Amsterdam. One of the first mansions in the P.C. Hooftstaat (1872) to be sold was bought by Henri Plate Jr., who worked at Van Eeghen & Co. Thanks to this lucrative form of land speculation, the park could expand until it finally reached its intended size in 1877. It was by then known as Vondelpark, after a prominent statue in the park of the 17th century poet and playwright Joost van den Vondel[40]. Van Eeghen stayed on the board of the park association for as long as he lived, just as he did with the VAK and Concordia.

His tireless efforts for Vondelpark brought him great esteem, but they also cost him a small fortune. However, in the end the park was not without financial profit for his own family either[41]. To this end he founded yet another organisation, this time a purely commercial one. In this case he effectively made use of his own charitable project to make private money – if only after his death. In 1881 he started construction company "Willemspark" ltd. with a few of his closest business friends[42]. Their aim was to build a posh residential area right next to Vondelpark: urban villa's in beautiful green surroundings. Several years before Van Eeghen and his friends had already cheaply bought the destined location: some unremarkable farmlands in the adjacent village of Nieuwer-Amstel. Here too, landscape architects Zocher made the design, but then patience was needed.

Van Eeghen's connections in Amsterdam were excellent, but he had to wait seven years before he was given permission by the municipality of Nieuwer-Amstel to start building. It was on this former farmland, that the expensive Willemspark neighbourhood arose in the late 19th century. The demand for detached villas proved disappointing, so most of the houses built were contiguous mansions. This whole part of Nieuwer-Amstel was eventually annexed by the city of Amsterdam. Willemspark is still one of its most expensive residential areas. And with over ten million visitors a year, Vondelpark is now one of Amsterdam's main attractions.

[39] SAA 352, inv. n° 59, Vondelpark report 1864-1892 (1892), p. 56-57.

[40] Placed in the park in 1867, at the instigation of a group of notables.

[41] It took a while for Willemspark to become profitable. Thus it was not Piet van Eeghen himself, but his children who enjoyed the benefits of this investment. After Van Eeghen's death in 1889, his nine surviving children jointly inherited his shares. These were valued at 70 875 Dutch guilders, which would now be worth over one million euros. SAA 1224, inv. n° 652, Memorie van Aangifte C. P. van Eeghen, p. 16.

[42] SAA 30106, Archive Bouwonderneming Willemspark.

BUSINESS AND IDEALS

Piet van Eeghen has long remained relatively unknown in historiography because he generally operated behind the scenes, always in association with others. But his influence on the metamorphosis of Amsterdam in the 19th century can hardly be overestimated. One only has to take a walk in Vondelpark or the Jordaan area to see his lasting influence. On a personal level, Van Eeghen drew on the same abilities, and networks for his business operations and his social activism. And even though he maintained a strict formal separation between his company and civic initiatives, the organization of his civic initiatives often took inspiration from his business practice.

Van Eeghen was not a typical activist. However, he was prepared to take action to create a better world (within the confines of Amsterdam), in a way which went much further than classic philanthropy. He did not just donate money to existing good causes: he founded and directed new societies which managed to change living conditions in Amsterdam for good. His case shows us how closely intertwined business and civic initiatives could be in the 19th century, even when they were formally separate. He successfully stimulated social responsibility in Amsterdam by putting great personal effort into pioneering civic initiatives, which were clearly outside of his official line of work. Although these private initiatives were separate from his company's goals, they were made possible by his company's status, profits, and network, as well as by his entrepreneurial spirit and commercial expertise.

Formally, merchant house Van Eeghen & Co. was strictly separate from Van Eeghen's associations to improve his own city. The merchant house's commercial trade in colonial goods contrasted sharply with the voluntary efforts to make Amsterdam a greener, more social, and more liveable city. Amsterdam and the Dutch colonies were different worlds to Van Eeghen, as they were to most of his contemporaries. However, both his entrepreneurial skills and business network were essential to the success of his civic initiatives. At the base of both Van Eeghen's social housing projects and the park association was the mobilisation of private funding. For this his business network was crucial. It was also of great importance that his partner at the family firm, Jan van Eeghen, fully supported these time and money consuming social projects. Although formally separate, informally the merchant house and Van Eeghen's associations were closely connected.

Within Van Eeghen's social projects, there was a combination of business and ideals. Gentleman activist Van Eeghen effectively combined social ideals and commercial motives, philanthropy and business. In order to bring about structural improvements for the city, he aimed to make his civic initiatives profitable. Thus shareholders in the VAK were given a profit to keep them involved, but it was limited to five per cent. The Vondelpark initiative was different in the sense that it was primarily a philanthropic project. But here too, Van Eeghen showed himself a man of business. By speculating with land, he effectively made use of his entrepreneurial skills to raise extra money, not only to expand the park, but via construction company Willemspark eventually also for his own family. His business-informed approach to civic initiative enabled these initiatives to thrive in 19th century Amsterdam but notably did not affect the way Van Eeghen and his contemporaries did business.

Van Eeghen, who died in 1889, did not live to see the Willemspark neighbourhood finished. He never knew that the most expensive street alongside the park would be named after him.