

# Vrij Nederland

**Vrij Nederlands (Dutch Weekly News Magazine).**

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**'Derde wereld' adviseert de 'eerste' Waarom de 'Anne Frank Moskee' er toch niet kwam ("Third World" advises the "First." Why the "Anne Frank Mosque" never came to be).**

<http://www.elinea.nl/artikel/waarom-de-anne-frank-moskee-er-toch-niet-kwam-2/8>



ON THE THIRD FLOOR OF THE CONCRETE GOLIATH 'the mill' in Leiden, is a small, cozy house with a neatly tiled roof. The entrance is clearly recognizable as a bookcase - think: Anne Frank's Secret Annex. Inside, there is little to see, apart from a Persian rug and something resembling an Islamic pulpit.

The American artists John Ewing and Christopher Robbins, co-founders of the

public art project "Ghana Think Tank," have until next Friday to work on an installation that could well become the most talked about work in the upcoming exhibition "Global Imaginations." Robbins takes out a box full of specially made Delftware, with pictures of tulips and Islamic motifs.

Against the wall is a sign calling for visitors to cover head, shoulders and ankles before entering "this sacred place." Another dozen

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unpacked boxes are waiting.

When asked how the work will finally come out, Robbins and Ewing respond with restraint. They do not know – not yet. For the past few weeks they have been engaged in intensive discussions behind the scenes of this project, with authorities and representatives of Muslim, Jewish and Christian circles. Whether it went too far. What reactions they had to take into account. And that's not all that strange if you know the title: the Anne Frank Mosque.

### **“Developing the first world”**

The plan was the result of a visit that brought the artists to Leiden in January, at the invitation of Museum De Lakenhal, to identify problems facing the local population. This was the starting point for a process that Ghana ThinkTank has used since its inception in 2006. They call it “The Flip.” Normally the rich West intervenes into the problems of poor countries, using international development to impose solutions from above, with all the misunderstandings and communication failures that entails. Ghana ThinkTank runs on this principle: let the so-called undeveloped countries analyze problems in so-called “developed” countries. Then, actually implement the solutions devised, however impractical or trivial they may seem. Their motto: “Developing the First World.”

The idea sprang from the personal experiences the artists had, working with development agencies after their college years. They were full of good intentions, but became frustrated by the smothering tendencies of development agents who often lacked knowledge of the cultures they were “improving.” These exchanges were rife with miscommunication, and, as Ewing calls it, “the paternalistic nature of the system.”

Robbins explains how, while living in Benin, West Africa, he saw a charity build wonderful pigsties for the local farmers, out of pure cement, while almost all the people themselves lived in mud huts. For them it was unthinkable to allow pigs such luxurious accommodation. At the same time, the chief of the village forbade the use of those pigsties as homes for humans, for fear of

alienating the generous donors through this “misuse.” Result: they remained unused.

Ewing caused major problems when he worked for a human rights organization in the countryside of El Salvador. “I interviewed local figures about what human rights meant to them. One boy complained to the camera about the town’s corrupt mayor, who planted corn in the town square for his personal profit. I thought it was good when people made statements like this, in order to get a dialogue started. But I had no sense of the realities there - you had death squads. That boy was beaten, one of my colleagues was kidnapped, and myself, I received death threats. I wanted to do something good, and thought I used a proven method, but it turned into a real mess.”

Also in El Salvador, Maria del Carmen Montoya, who later joined Ghana ThinkTank, worked on behalf of a charity helping local farmers in their dealings with large food producers. “They were all led by Americans,” she said via Skype from New York. “I had to translate, and create a form of understanding between those groups. So I had to teach the Americans a basic form of Spanish. To my surprise they were only interested in words like ‘silo’, ‘exchange rate’ and ‘transport.’ The assumption by the Americans was that the poor peasants would have an instant confidence in the Americans, because they had trucks and other means, and brought the promise of a better life. I thought: this is not working. You should also learn to say ‘good morning,’ and ‘how many children do you have?’ So I made a handbook myself, with phrases that bear witness to real human interest.”

### **A new name for a dog**

In their final year at the Rhode Island School of Design, Ewing, Robbins and their fellow student of Ghanaian origin Matey Odonkor, decided to flip their experiences, and elevate them to an art project.

They went to the very prosperous town of Westport, Connecticut to gather their “problems.” They then presented those problems to “think tanks” consisting of people who had been approached for the project: a group of Ghanaian bike mechanics, New York prisoners, and

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Mexican teachers. “We wanted to hear voices from other than” says Robbins, “the New York Public Radio-listening Facebook friends that we know.”

The problems of Westport ranged from small and personal to comprehensive. A dog barked incessantly at the neighbors. People complained about the lack of diversity in their predominantly white community. Ewing: “The response we got from the think tanks was: what are they talking about? There are probably lots of Latinos in their town, to mow their grass and do their laundry. They just are not really seen as human beings, let alone as friends. Their solution was to hire Immigrant day laborers to attend Westport parties and openings, and pay them for it.”

And in such a way Ewing backed himself into a hole, at his side two Mexicans who did not speak English. “The gallery owner was excited that someone from outside the usual circle showed up,” he says, laughing. “She immediately asked if they wanted to come more often, to which one of the Mexicans respond, ‘Well, any time you pay me fifteen dollars an hour to drink wine and have a chat, I’ll be happy to return.’ I did not translate that part. It was all pretty uncomfortable. But that was our intention. The idea of this project is to turn around the vision of reality. In others, but also in ourselves.”

As for the barking dog: Latin America advised to throw a shoe at the window of the dog’s owner, so that the problem was no longer between man and animal, but between two people. “The dog was only doing his job,” says Ewing. “It was an interpersonal problem.” The Ghanaian think tank suggested giving the animal a new name, so that the owner’s efforts to make his dog less unfriendly would echo through the neighborhood. “And that’s what happened,” said Montoya. “‘Duke’ was renamed ‘Love.’ The dog’s owner later said she felt the dog was actually a little calmer as a result of being called this soothing name.” It may sound trivial, but Montoya finds just those little personal problems that emerge during a project the most interesting. “For these show that we humans do have a lot in common, wherever we live. And the small solutions are also practical. Sometimes we

hear from the think tanks things like ‘throw out the whole educational system.’ And that’s something that obviously is not within our capabilities.”

### **Sexy memories**

Over ten years Ghana ThinkTank has grown into a global project. The group is sponsored and paid per assignment, including work in remote Moroccan villages. In the violently-divided town of Mitrovica in Kosovo, an Albanian think tank pondered over solutions to the problems of Serbs. For a project at the US/ Mexico border, deported immigrants and vigilante groups who patrol the border ponder over each other’s troubles. Numerous new think tanks have been founded: medical students in Gaza, a family of three generations in Cuba, a group of artists in Iran, a hacker collective in Indonesia, the founders of a small radio station in El Salvador, et cetera. “Our concern is the wisdom of the masses,” says Ewing. “To get opinions and analysis from a perspective that you will not often see in Western countries. We ask think tanks to film their sessions, and we show those videos in our exhibition. Then visitors can see how the people over there analyze our problems.”

One of the recurring issues in rich countries, says Ewing, is the fact that older people come to be excluded from society. “This is a problem they do not know in many Third World countries. We were told: ‘Seriously? Children do not live with you in the same house as their grandparents? That really seems like a horrible situation!’” According to the Iranian think tank’s analysis, Western young people simply forget how much they have in common with the older generation, who, after all, were once young.

By way of solution, the Iranians advised Ghana ThinkTank to collect funny stories from elderly people about their past sexual escapades, and to submit them on iPods for the youth. Its implementation was initially quite difficult, laughs Carmen Montoya. “I was in the streets of Wales, talking to random old ladies. One of the first days, a woman hit me with her handbag. Man, it felt as if a brick was in it! But eventually it all worked out, and we put together a ‘dirty tea’ in which oldies with a big smile picked sexy

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memories from their youth to talk about while drinking tea together.”

Over the years, the project continued to surprise the founders again and again. “It is a process of reflection,” said Montoya. “Identifying problems creates an image of a

community: a portrait of discontent. The responses come back, give an impression of how the community looks in the eyes of others, indirectly giving insight into their own communities. It ensures that all parties look again and again at themselves.”



### **Rather Turkish than Popish**

In January this year, Ghana ThinkTank travelled through many districts in Leiden, in a construction trailer covered in birdhouses. Leideners could lodge their complaints in a bright red mailbox or vent in a video interview. The artists, who, in their projects, knowingly cherish the position of naive outsider, previously had the stereotypical image of the Netherlands as a tolerant country where anything goes. They had no clue of the changes that have taken place in the Netherlands since the murders of Pim Fortuyn and Theo van Gogh.

They started their inventory soon after the terrorist attacks in Paris, but no Leidener stepped forward with complaints about Muslims or Islam. Besides the nuisance of seagulls in the city, growing intolerance in the Netherlands was the big concern that emerged. “It was mainly about the rise of right-wing parties and the position of

Muslims in the Netherlands,” says Ewing. “People were concerned that the attack would have consequences. There were Muslims who gave examples of the prejudices they faced. For example, one young woman said that she was looked down upon at work since she started to wear a headscarf, and was no longer invited to parties.”

The reaction of the think tanks - in this case the hacker collective groups in Indonesia, and the Eritreans and Sudanese in Israel to try to gain refugee status - was clear: create understanding over and over again. Ewing: “They said a worldwide religion is being judged on the actions of a group of extremists, and that’s not fair. There should be a dialogue, interaction - that sort of thing.”

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That was all fine, of course, but how? The artists began to delve into the Dutch history. “We discovered a trail of Islamic influences in the Netherlands of the sixteenth century,” says Robbins. “That William of Orange, for example, had close ties to Suleiman the Magnificent, the then sultan of the Ottoman Empire. At the time different religions were tolerated together, while in Europe the Protestant rebellions were beaten down by the Spanish Inquisition. We found out that the Sea Beggars [famous Dutch pirates who relieved Leiden from the starvation imposed by the Spanish] used the slogan “Rather Turkish than Popish,” and used the Muslim Crescent moon as their symbol. This symbol still adorns the towers of the Leiden city hall. And you know who was advocated by Suleiman to support William of Orange’s rebellion against the Spanish? The Jewish diplomat Joseph Nasi, who had fled Catholic Spain, moved to Antwerp and then became a powerful man at the court in Constantinople. These are all things that the people seem to have forgotten here. So what we really want to say is – ”

Ewing: “That the Dutch should develop a close relationship with Islam again, if they want to regain their tolerance.”

The artists then wondered what was the symbol of tolerance in the Netherlands today, and soon found Anne Frank.

Robbins: “That is how our idea began to take root.” A rather tricky context: although Otto Frank said at the opening of the Anne Frank House in 1960 that “what Anne really wanted is to [...] work on peace, tolerance and understanding,” for many people, Anne Frank is primarily a reminder of the horrors of the Holocaust, and thus a symbol that you should stay away from – as the artists would soon find out.

Ewing: “The first reaction came from the family of my wife, who is Jewish, and from friends whose parents survived the Holocaust. They became quite upset. Like, what are you trying to say? Anne Frank is someone who represents *us*. *Do not mess with her.*”

But the think tanks in remote corners of the world felt the idea was much more grounded. “When we received so many

angry responses, we again went to consult the think tanks. The Eritreans in Israel said that one of them, coincidentally, was busy translating the diary of Anne Frank into Eritrean. For them, Anne is very much a universal symbol. Her story enforced humanity. So, they said, it seems a wonderful idea. And this is exactly what Ghana ThinkTank is about: cultural connections and the dialogue that comes from it, with all the understanding and misunderstanding that goes. The process is in a sense the end.”

### Frantic consultation

“We discovered a trail of Islamic influences in the Netherlands of the sixteenth century.”

So the artists reported six weeks ago to Museum De Lakenhal, their idea for the Anne Frank Mosque. An Imam would inaugurate the building. “It could very well be violent,” was the first thought of Meta Knol, director of the museum. “But I also thought, it sounds like a good job. I realized that if I overruled, there might be violent reactions.” Thus began a period of frantic consultations, with Knol acting as intermediary between the artists and various individuals and institutions in the Netherlands – they do not want to mention names.

“It is for a museum director a rather unusual position,” she says. “You operate in the focus of contentious social issues. Ultimately, it turned out well, but it took a lot of diplomacy.”

The artists themselves also took notice. “I did not foresee that this would be the most emotionally traumatizing project we ever did,” says Christopher Robbins. Ultimately, the work by the artists itself was adapted under the influence of the comments. It is no longer a Mosque. The artists have chosen another aspect instead, which was already present in the work, but better to highlight: the history of Islam in relation to the Dutch history. Placards hang with quotes from both Suleiman the Great and Joseph Nasi, as well as Otto and Anne Frank. The initiation by an Imam was left out. And the main adjustment is the name of the project. “Anne Frank Mosque” met with too much resistance. It is now: “Monument to the

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Dutch.” Subtitle: an installation that brings together sacred symbols of tolerance.

So be it, say both Ewing and Robbins. To simply provoke was never their goal. “It is important that people experience the work uninhibited by preconceptions,” says John Ewing. “We do not want the groups driven apart, but rather united.”



A ThinkTank of African asylum seekers in Israel discuss the problems of Leiden