

**James Beckett**

*Metropolis M;*

*James Beckett's smoking stage for a post-industrial society, September, 2016*

# James Beckett's smoking stage for a post-industrial society

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Smouldering between the high-rise offices of Amsterdam's main business district, the installation *Palace Ruin* by James Beckett (1977) stands in sharp contrast to the surrounding corporate architecture. Finding the work is not too difficult – the sense of smell rather than that of sight will inevitably lead you to its location, as the pungent odour of soot and ash gets stronger the closer you get. White smoke billowing around the structure stops students, barista's on their lunchbreak and pinstriped suited businessmen in their tracks. But not to worry - signs around the installation inform onlookers that the structure is in fact not on fire. There is no need to alert the fire brigade.

At first glance *Palace Ruin*, which is a reconstruction of a remnant of the 19th century *Paleis voor Volksvlijt*, seems out of place trapped between buildings in an area known as the 'financial mile'. But on closer inspection, the relevance of its present context becomes apparent. Beckett's inspiration for the artwork came from a found picture of the burnt ruins of the *Paleis voor Volksvlijt*; a large 19th century exhibition hall that was destroyed by fire in 1929 and was located at Frederiksplein, the place of the present-day De Nederlandsche Bank . Recently, there has been a revival of interest in the *Paleis voor Volksvlijt*, which was modelled after the former London Hyde Park exhibition hall Crystal Palace and was built with the same pioneering methods of that time, such as prefabricated glass and cast iron girders. Both palaces housed exhibitions that showcased contemporary cultural and industrial achievements in order to promote the role each nation had played during the industrialization in the 19th century. These exhibitions stood as symbols of the economic changes that had affected each nation due to rapid transformations during the second industrial revolution. Unfortunately, both buildings suffered the same terrible fate - Crystal Palace burned down just seven years after the destruction of *Palace voor Volksvlijt* in 1929.

According to Beckett, the *Paleis voor Volksvlijt* represents a 19th century example of the type of corporate architecture which you'll find nowadays in the financial district of Amsterdam. Industrial development, innovation and elements of demise set against today's social reality play a major role in Beckett's work, which often incorporates everyday objects that relate to the industrial and social histories of Europe. In this respect, *Palace Ruin*, with its theme of demise, fits in well.

The same theme also figured prominently in last year's installation at the Zuidas, where Leonard van Munster had placed a large capsized yacht in more or less the same present-day location as *Palace Ruin*. The yacht, aptly titled *Fortuna* (after the Roman goddess of Fate), symbolized the turbulent times of modern day society after the credit crunch.

Like Van Munster's the installation of James Beckett provides a striking contrast to its corporate surroundings. It shows his eye for detail. Think of the lovely, delicate details of botanical elements on the blackened iron, which probably refer to the designs of the renowned horticulturalist Joseph Paxton, whose pioneering work with glass conservatories led to his promotion as the head architect for *Crystal Palace*. Unfortunately, the hosepipe attachment at the back of the installation, which lets out steam at set intervals, is rather crude. The smoke not only serves to give the object a retro-feel from the 19th century steam age, it also adds a feeling of urgency, a need to get out.

With the installation of *Palace Ruin*, Beckett succeeds in placing a fascinating and integral part of Amsterdam's history within the context of our current social reality. A series of lectures organised in the context of *Palace Ruin* provide in-depth discussions on the function of this site-specific work and how it relates to the corporate world around it. Perhaps discussing how *Palace Ruin* poses a warning to our capitalist, post-industrial society - obsessed with continual economic growth - that it may also, one day, go up in flames.

