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Public Space in the Making: A Rotterdam Experiment

Wouter Storm

Abstract

My project examines a series of local initiatives in Rotterdam, The Netherlands, where residents exercise their will and power to reshape the city according to their own needs.

Born and raised in Rotterdam, the Netherlands—the pre-war Jazz capital of Europe—I have witnessed the city’s change from a swiftly rebuilt post-war city into a must-see tourist spot with a promising and unique skyline. Founded in 1340, Rotterdam—the world’s biggest harbor at the time—was severely bombed by the Nazis on May 14th, 1940, in the early stages of World War II. Rotterdam’s inner city was leveled to the ground: in just 14 minutes! Some ninety bombers dropped a devastating 97,000 kg of red hot exploding shrapnel above the city center, which totally burnt down (Fig. 1). Ever since, public space has not been taken for granted. But up to which point should public space be directed from above? Free trade, public gatherings, and urban improvisations have always been a driving force in this international port city.



Fig. 1. Rotterdam in 1946, after all the debris from the bombing was removed.
Source: Image Bank Aviodome.

The destruction of the very heart of Rotterdam could give the Nazis the opportunity to observe how a modern city should be built from the ground up and with the contribution of Dutch city planners. That was to serve also as an example for how future cities, in Germany and elsewhere, should be built. After the debris was removed, Rotterdam’s blank canvas needed to be shaped for future growth: intensive analysis, planning and rezoning were under way (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Protest against the emptiness in downtown Rotterdam, 1966. Photo credit: Ary Groeneveld, Stadsarchief Rotterdam.

Besides hastily built housing, infrastructure, office spaces, and shops, the post-war Rotterdam regeneration initiatives involved creating a vast outdoor art collection and urban festivals, which were to serve the city's cultural melting pot. Subcultures emerged and different areas across the city developed their own identities. Over the next 70 years, continuously, as Rotterdam rebuilt itself, it grew many vibrant city hearts instead of its former single city center.

Now a city of almost 618,000, Rotterdam continues to experience unprecedented growth of iconic projects. Recently, we have seen "De Rotterdam"—the biggest building in the Netherlands, designed by Rem Koolhaas—arise on the boardwalk of the river Maas (Fig. 3), the enormous temporary staircase built by the City Municipality to celebrate the reconstruction of the City Center (Fig. 4), the floating pavilion (Fig. 5), and many large festivals (Fig. 6) serving the Municipality's urge for cultural growth and urban leisure. In fact, according to *Lonely Planet's Best in Travel 2016*, Rotterdam ranks fifth on the list of top ten cities worldwide to visit in 2016. Its "futuristic architecture, inspired initiatives such as inner-city canal surfing [in concept at that time], a proliferation of art, and a surge of drinking, dining and nightlife venues," make Rotterdam "one of Europe's most exhilarating cities right now," claims the *Dutch Daily News* that published *Lonely Planet's* ranking. But should all of these iconic projects be built mainly to attract tourists? Shouldn't serving and facilitating Rotterdam's residents be the priority? And if so, shouldn't residents have a bigger say in what happens to their surroundings? That could create investment opportunities benefiting the ideas of residents and local businesses.



Fig. 3. High-rise offices, apartments, theaters, and shops are still emerging at a high pace, 2015. Photo credit: Wouter Storm.



Fig. 4. “De Trap (The Stairway),” 2016—a gift to the public by the City Municipality. This striking temporary stairway was erected to celebrate the rebuilding of the city center, directly alongside the renewed Central Station. This station about tripled in size, offering travelers an unforgettable experience because of its iconic look, and was completely rebuilt while remaining fully functional in the process. Structures are completed but how to anthropomorphize the use of these urban playgrounds from here on? Photo credit: Wouter Storm



Fig. 5. The Floating Pavilion (2005-2010). Three interlinked spheres, the largest of which with a radius of 12 meters. The total floor space of pavilion island is 46 x 24 meters. An innovative and sustainable building, which is climate change resilient and reflects Rotterdam's adaptation strategy in response to climate change. Now that all commercial and industrial activity has been moved to massive transfer sites at the coast, the question remains of how to re-appropriate vacant former city harbors? Rotterdam's residents were previously so strongly connected to the harbor activities. How will they be involved with the waterfront in the future?

Source: <http://www.drijvendpaviljoen.nl/#!floating-pavilion-event-location/h0t59>



Fig. 6. Large public events are a weekly routine during summertime in Rotterdam, serving tourists, residents, and the local economy. Could these events reinforce a creative and bottom-up grassroots revival thus contributing to sustainable economic growth?

Source: www.gersrotterdam.nl

Yet, just like the rest of the world, Rotterdam has experienced its own recent shakeups: a housing crisis (prompted by the proliferation of vacant buildings and decrease of subsidized housing) and a high unemployment rate. How can public space respond to the changing needs of its users in these circumstances and contribute to the resistance to the recently waged urban terror and imbalance all over Europe? Can residents feel more connected to the city and to each other by participating in local initiatives in public space?

As Rotterdam is searching for sustainable concepts to engage its citizens and optimize positive identity, independent local initiatives are necessary more than ever. Without residents showing initiative and investing in solutions, this hastily rebuilt city could suffer from greatly increasing regulations and intolerance. It is time to design the city based on what its residents truly want and need: a grass-roots approach to city planning, a decreased initiative involvement but increased facilitating role by the City Municipality, and a grounds-up city marketing approach so that residents and visitors can grow into real ambassadors before big international investors get involved. It is time for the residents of Rotterdam to reclaim their city, by developing 21st century strategies, concepts, and initiatives for contributing to local economies, sharing public space, and designing diverse environments.

One great example has been set up by *City in the Making* (Stad in de Maak, www.stadindemaak.nl)—an association for “new urbanity” and “unconventional resurrection management,” modelled partially after housing cooperatives and partially after open source and circular economy initiatives run by locals (Fig. 7). Since 2014, they have been transforming vacant buildings, which did not fit regular redevelopment plans, into collectively owned and managed affordable and sustainable housing and workspaces. *City in the Making* invites anyone to develop his/her own concept for collective and sustainable common use in close contact with other residents. Although the initial projects are for 10 years, this self-organizing group of passionate residents hope to develop long-term, sustainable plans for the buildings, currently four, and made available by Havensteder, a real estate corporation. The main feature of these buildings is the combination of living and working, where the upper floors are living or working spaces and the ground floor—for production and collective use. The rent of the upper floors pays for low-cost access to the ground floor facilities. The multi-use spaces and workshops provide the link among residents, users, and communities. The goals of *City in the Making* are several, among which “no speculation with living and workshop spaces,” “partial independence from large economical systems,” and communal management and income generation (www.stadindemaak.nl).



Fig. 7. At 35B Pieter de Raadtstraat, the building is being redeveloped from the street level up. The ground floor has been transformed to serve the needs of the community: a wood workers shop educates eager craftsmen; the onsite laundromat invites people to do their laundry with a locally produced biological detergent; the brewery may soon be producing a “hop brew”—beer without alcohol—so people from all religions and ages can have a healthy drink for a low price. The building is now under the management of *City in the Making* and its resident contributors, 2016. Photo credit: Wouter Storm

I recently started *Gallery Tutti Cortex*, which is exhibiting locally produced, sustainable, and innovatively designed furniture. As an interior designer, I know well that interior architecture is not limited only to offices and houses. Cities too define their interiors by “growing” public spaces, squares, and infrastructure. My hope is that in the next decade the creative crafts and production industry create a more powerful exchange of knowledge and skills and deliver design directly visible at the street level. With my partners at *RNW Conceptdesign*, I initiated *Greenland* (2008), a plan for a floating city park in the river Maas, to boost the use of the boardwalk by moving a floating city park full of creativity from harbor to harbor. In relation to the current social economic landscape, communally managing vacant buildings might better fulfill this goal. And maybe culture in general could better be defined nowadays as the culture of creating a stimulating surrounding to both work and live in.

Gallery Tutti Cortex focuses on the added value of developing innovative production at local sites, with local raw materials. The gallery’s next satellite branch is going to be at *BlueCity010* (Fig. 8), where economy is being “re-defined”, with “lectures, co-creation, experiments, and hack parties” (www.bluecity.nl). In “Tropicana,” a former tropical indoor swimming pool in Rotterdam, Siemen Cox and Mark Slegers started *RotterZwam*—

www.rotterzwam.nl—a blue economy initiative (focusing on the re-use of plentiful local waste and up-cycling their own rest materials) for growing mushrooms on coffee waste. At this vibrant location, they attract entrepreneurs and exchange open source knowledge about the circular economy and effective sustainability. *BlueCity 010* is not just re-formulating policy, as most initiatives do, but creating a playground for circular business. “This is where we observe nature and create endless circles of value. We learn from nature. In nature there is no waste. Output for one is input for the other. This is where we redefine economy” (www.bluecity.nl).



Fig. 8. BlueCity010: a former subtropical swimming paradise, currently the flywheel for the emerging blue economy (where waste appears to be value production material).
Source: www.bluecity010.nl, Superuse Studios

In Beverwaard, a neighborhood of Rotterdam where residents were highly involved in developing ideas for interventions in public space, in order to improve the conditions of small crime and deprivation, “Beacons of Beverwaard” (“Bakens van Beverwaard”) was launched (Fig. 9). Residents came together, without any restriction, to share their dreams for their own neighborhood: workshops and meetings were staged, during which the residents, together, composed live music, wrote lyrics, created a scale model of their dream neighborhood, and produced an outdoor festival weekend. The model, constantly growing and accommodating new ideas and dreams, was on display in a work and exhibition space in the shopping center. For the first time in the neighborhood’s history, no one was excluded from these initiatives and no fights occurred. Unfortunately, the subsidy for this project ended in 2010, due to the financial crisis, and since there was no re-focusing on developing independent survival and sustainability of this productive interaction, the project itself ended. And yet “Beacons of Beverwaard” echoes the philosophy of Danish architect Bjarke Ingels for architecture that reflects our dreams

(Schröder). Ingels' structures, the product of many ideas, are "promiscuous hybrids," such as Mountain Dwellings in Orestad, Copenhagen, where terraced apartments and gardens rest on top of multi-storied parking lots. Well-positioned sites thus increase contact among residents. To apply this to the strict post-war Rotterdam architecture, Beverwaard included, neighbors should be able to develop lasting and appealing strategies for their own involvement in various activities in public space.



Fig. 9. A scale model of dreams in Beverwaard's brand shop. Here, interviews combined with workshops about public space provided much-needed bonding in the community, 2010. Photo Credit: Wouter Storm at RNW Conceptdesign. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bd6Tiiazptg>

Participation in the creation of public space by those who live, work, and commute through it is essential. In 2015, the Rotterdam-based design studio *ZUS* (<http://www.zus.cc>) offered a terrific model of how this can be done. Their project *Luchtingel* (Air Canal)—a 3-legged, 400 meter-long elevated pedestrian walkway—proposed to swiftly connect three distant city areas (Fig. 10). To do so, *ZUS* launched a public crowdfunding campaign: for 25 euro (28 USD), anyone could sign to support the project and, in exchange, get his/her name written on a wooden plank along the yellow-painted passage. 8,000 people pledged their support for this pedestrian bridge, and eventually the City Municipality contributed money for the completion of the project. The Air Canal, which runs through the building where it was conceived, above roads and railways, connecting the recently renovated Rotterdam Centraal Station with the historic Laurenskwartier district, as well as other public projects (a rooftop garden, a park), is rightfully considered "a new way of making the city," as Elma van Boxel, co-creator of *ZUS*, explains (*dezeen magazine*). The process of creating The Air Canal started off when *ZUS* took over a vacant building on Schieblock, and moved its studio onto the 1st floor; the rest of the building became an "incubator" for young artists and entrepreneurs. Next they created the strategy for the elevated pedestrian route, whose walkways "converge in a

circular viewing platform with built-in seating” (*dezeen magazine*). A true stage where residents can celebrate their influence on public space, the Air Canal makes us wonder if it is possible to have many more local initiatives supported by public contribution.

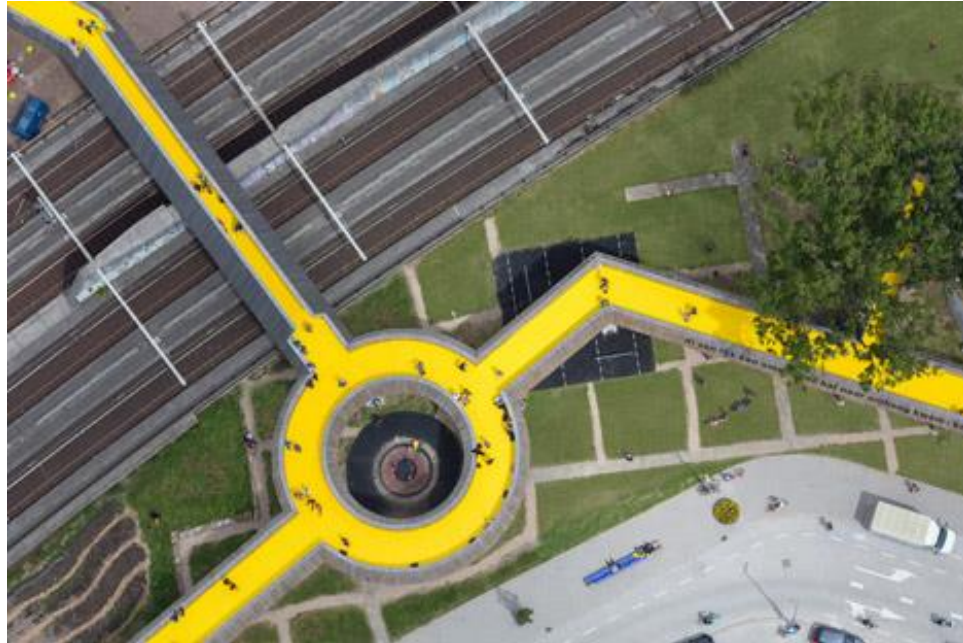


Fig. 10. The Luchtsingel (Air Canal) pedestrian bridge in Rotterdam started as a crowdfunding project, in which people could “adopt” planks for the bridge, for 25 Euro each.
Source: <http://www.dezeen.com/2015/07/16/luchtsingel-elevated-pathways-bridges-rotterdam-cityscape-zus-architects/>

By actively involving city residents in urban processes, social structures get condensed and people feel closer to each other, and more secure. The fact that they have a personal voice materialized in a city project makes them feel like they truly belong not only to that particular project and place but also to the city as a whole. And with belonging, as we know, come care and responsibility.

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About the author

Wouter Storm graduated from the Willem de Kooning Art Academy in Rotterdam (Netherlands). An interior designer and founder of *Gallery Tutti Cortex* and co-founder of *RNW Conceptdesign*, he has worked previously at EGM Architects, and with the Zeeuws Museum (2012-2015).
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