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AND ... WHAT NEXT?!

THE EVOLUTION OF ROTTERDAM CULTURAL POLICY: THE 1980S AND 1990S, THE EUROPEAN CULTURAL CAPITAL 2001

TEXT & FOTO: MARIANGELA LAVANGA

Notwithstanding the strong economic recession in the 1970s, a clever policy to support investment and socio-economic regeneration allowed Rotterdam to maintain its position as «world port number 1». At the same time, Rotterdam's image is shifting from a harbour and working one into a more dynamic, convivial and attractive, showing a city in continuous movement and change. Its impressive reconstruction after the bombing during the Second World War, which destroyed almost the entire historic inner city, has been followed by a new urban development plan, formulated in the second half of the 1980s on the base of a broader debate concerning the future of the city and inspired by developments in Baltimore, one of the first cities to adopt a waterfront regeneration program based on culture and leisure activities. In this period, Rotterdam was dealing with a rise of unemployment, a strong sub-urbanisation of the higher-income families to the peripheral district following

the urban crisis of the 1970s, the consequent social unbalance in the city centre and a deteriorating investment climate.

The policy memorandum «Revitalising Rotterdam», issued in 1987, started to look at culture, leisure and tourism as elements of an appealing ambience, part of the vision of the complete town, aimed at increasing the urban quality of life. Policies were developed to promote high-grade services for citizens and visitors and to raise the spatial quality through, for example, architecture and the reorganisation of public squares. Since then, architecture has been used as a form of advertising for the city, able to transmit a catching, idiosyncratic image of urban vitality and integral part of the incorporation of cultural investment and policy into urban growth strategies. Among the development priorities were mentioned the renovation of the old city districts, the transformation of former harbours and the upgrading of the waterfront, a greater concentration



The Erasmus Bridge



The new Unilever building & the old railway bridge

of diverse museums and the creation of a «museum quarter» (masterplanned by Rem Koolhaas) in an existing park area (the Museumpark). The city succeeded in getting the Netherlands Architecture Institute (Nai) to move from Amsterdam to Rotterdam by offering it a free location in the Museumpark, in the middle of the city, and organising an international competition resulting in the famous Nai building (see fig. 1). Scapino Ballet company also moved to Rotterdam, as did the Witte de With International Art centre and the Berlage Institute of Architecture (BiA). A «cultural axis» has been defined, connecting the museum quarter to the historical harbour area, and the connecting street, Witte de Withstraat, being transformed into a «cultural quarter».

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However, compared to the rest of The Netherlands, Rotterdam still has social problems: lower education levels for high-skilled (pre-university) people, and a more serious situation with low-income groups. This is due to the peculiar social composition given by the dominant port activities, and to the strong presence of immigrants, which make Rotterdam «a multi-ethnic city, but not necessarily multicultural and not easily cosmopolitan».

The recent appointment of Rotterdam as «Cultural Capital of Europe» for the year 2001, with the motto «Rotterdam is many cities» can be seen as the highest momentum for the cultural strategy of the city, representing, as its director Bert van Meggelen explained, a «SWOT analysis to look back at the strengths and weaknesses of the city». The multicultural city was intended to be promoted: an attempt to bring into contact the cultures of ethnic minorities with the rest of the city with a focus on supporting and developing youth culture. The central objectives in Rotterdam 2001 were the long term lasting effects in two realms: community and arts. Several institutions and events started in 2001 continue their activities very successfully: Calypso, Las Palmas and the Motel Mozaique festival. In par-

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Multiculturalism in the Blaak Market

ticular, Las Palmas, once workshop of the Holland America Line, is still used as art centre, in addition to a disco. On its roof there is still the "Parasite House", an experimental form of housing and living, as well as technological and spatial-planning innovations. Nevertheless, there seems that there is still little integration between the new face of Rotterdam and its residents, as the low levels of participation of the indigenous population to the cultural events show. Rotterdam is still predominantly a worker's city, where middle and high-income groups are only a small minority.

Some problems and issues related to the legacies and long-term impacts can be raised: the decreased public sector funding, the political changes (after eight year socialist-liberal government of 1994-2002, after the murder of its leader Pin Fortuyn, a Christian-conservative coalition took over) and the consequent change in city priorities (less priority to arts and culture, and on cultural diversity). Moreover, Rotterdam is becoming witness of a phenomenon that could be called "the dissolution of urban planning and the inversion of cultural planning" (Vanstiphout, forthcoming). Through the "Groebrijlante" (growing diamonds) project, Rotterdammers are called to

submit projects to the City Council aiming to strengthen their neighbourhood, through the use of culture. This project shows the new philosophy embraced by the City Council aiming at a) replacing «top-down» urbanistic and cultural planning approaches with a system of stimulating and rewarding «bottom-up» entrepreneurship initiatives, b) changing the cultural and economic make-up of the city through highly specific projects with huge spin-off effects instead of a holding masterplanning. The project seems to work quite well. Instead of huge cultural and economic projects with world famous architects realised in locations chosen by the city planners, as it happened in the past, the City Council adopts a «bottom-up» approach. The project is acting as "a brutal provocation to the artistic and architectural elite of the city, by seemingly destroying any chance for huge, centrally supported, cultural programs on a monumental level, and turning cultural and architectural innovation over the streets" (Wouter Vanstiphout). There is not anymore planning, neither urban nor cultural, no planning model to refer to: who will profit from that chaos?! «

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