

VAN DER LEEUWKRING

privaat initiatief voor publieke ruimte

I was in Rotterdam in the week of September 23 -29, 2009, to assist the community in finding ways to make Rotterdam more liveable and more competitive. I was there to add to a rich and creative discussion that is going on in Rotterdam, and has been going on for some time, as the City Hall and many organizations and individuals are moving in a deliberate way to prepare the city for the future. This is very commendable and forward thinking.

This report summarizes my findings and advice from this visit.

Smart growth in Rotterdam

Considerations from a Vancouver perspective
by **Larry Beasley**



over
architectuur
gesproken



PREAMBLE

As an opening finding, it has to be emphasized that Rotterdam is already a great and amenable place – I hope Rotterdammers appreciate that in the context of world cities. It is a good place to work and play and raise a family. It is a comparatively economical place to live and do business. But I have learned of the challenges that the city faces: a shifting economy, the loss of families to the suburbs, the loss of some core business anchors, the need to refresh the city's image, and the rising costs of sustaining the urban setting at standards that citizens expect. These are big challenges that put at risk the qualities that people hold dear for Rotterdam.

I was invited to Rotterdam because my city, Vancouver in Canada, has gone through a similar process of economic restructuring and of discovering a creative way into the future. Vancouver is a city about the same size as Rotterdam sitting at the centre of a region of almost 2.5 million people located out on Canada's west coast, a long way away from Rotterdam, and even a long way away from the cultural centres of my own country. Being half way across the world from one another and in different societies, we are very different communities, but we also have many similarities – and these are not just because Dutch and Canadian people have kindred attitudes and views of life, which I truly think they do. For different reasons, much of both of our cities has been built since the war with varying degrees of quality and success. Both cities are harbour cities and they are among the world's key ports, with huge

marine business; but now, both also have many waterfront sites that have been freed up for redevelopment, moving away from port functions as the geography of each port has adjusted with its growth. Both cities have a relatively healthy inner city and stable nearby neighbourhoods. Putting aside the port business, both urban economies are in a transition from production to service and creative endeavours. Neither city is a capital city and both compete for attention with other powerful national cities in their countries.

Vancouver 25 years ago was where Rotterdam is today in terms of levels of urban transformation. Vancouver has seen in that quarter century extraordinary change that has been guided by policies and development management practices that have served the city well but that, when the transformation began, were seen to be counter-intuitive to the way business was then done in North America. I hope Vancouver's experience can offer some ideas of things that work and don't work - and that is the perspective that I bring to my contribution in Rotterdam.

In my role in Rotterdam during my week of intensive investigation, I was asked to be an "urban critic". I visited most parts of the city. I talked extensively with many people and groups. I did everything in my power to soak up the place to understand where this city has come from and what it faces as it moves forward. I know a lot more now than I did at the beginning of that process, but I

also know better now what I don't know and can't know from my short visit – that has to be kept in mind as one considers the recommendations and suggestions that I have concluded.

Wherever I work, I look at things from a framework of simple propositions that I have found to be consistent in the growth of viable, vibrant and liveable cities. I am working all over the world in cities with dramatically different histories, settings and circumstances and there seems to be a list of basic principles that are relevant everywhere. Here is that list of those principles, or what I call the basic building blocks for smart growth:

- Regional structure – land use balance and alternative transportation;
- Clustered density, mixed use, quality of life;
- Diversity – socio-economic mix;
- Culture;
- Built form and green construction;
- Sustainability and alternative infrastructure; and,
- Sense of place or "placemaking".

I have used this list in my assessment of the situation in Rotterdam.

I also look at things from the perspective of Vancouver, where I was the Director of Planning for many years; the key years of change, especially in our inner city. In contrast to the suburban image that is swamping the world of urbanism, Vancouverites had to find an intense, diverse and yet intimately humane path, leaving behind those awfully destructive



street and subdivision standards and corporate architecture formulas and outdated zoning separations and the auto mania that are killing North American cities. Vancouver tested many new ideas so there are now many things on the ground for anyone to see and evaluate.

Most importantly, I have come to practice planning from a different perspective than many other planners – and I commend that perspective to all urbanists. I call it “experiential planning”. This is an approach that, of course, considers the systemic requirements of the city and the wide land use and transportation overview, but it also puts a top priority on understanding and creating the real tangible experiences that people tell us they want as they inhabit and use the city every day. These become the atomic fragments from which the city is built up. This has two fundamental aspects. First, it takes a consumer focus to define what needs to be done in the creation of the city; and, second, it takes a physical urban design focus at a basic level to realize those consumer hopes and expectations. And the reason that is so important is that it is the experience of the city, moment to moment, that sets peoples’ attitudes about the place and their memory of the place and the image of the place that they project to the world. I hope people will see how especially relevant this can be for a city like Rotterdam where there is a strong desire to rebrand the city for the future. In this report, I will cover several prime themes that I have come to see as the

key agenda for Rotterdam’s further evolution, as follows:

- Regeneration of the Inner City, including
 - Neighbourhoods and family life,
 - Community ambience, and,
 - Quality of life;
- High-rises and streetlife; and,
- Cooperative planning.

In each case, I will quickly describe my Vancouver references and then move to a summary of my suggestions for Rotterdam.

However, I want to be clear. In making the thematic and visual links between Vancouver and Rotterdam, I am NOT suggesting that the Vancouver pattern, in its density, height or form, is directly relevant to or logical for Rotterdam. On the contrary, every city has to settle on its own image and style appropriate to its own culture, history and setting. The last thing I would like to think is that any part of the spirit and flavour of Vancouver would find its way as a replication in Rotterdam as a result of my visit. Every city has to avoid the homogenization of all aspects of urbanism that is sweeping the world with globalization. Every city has to find its own uniqueness of place, which is very hard with the international character of modern architecture and corporate interest but which is nonetheless vital – a uniqueness of place that will make that community memorable and keep it separate in peoples’ minds from other communities and that will engender an emotional

connection, dare I say, a strong affection, of citizens. But maybe the principles behind the forms will be applicable, especially if people want to avoid the destructive trends that are proving to be so negative to most growing cities around the world.

And related to this, one of the most profound conclusions I have drawn is that Rotterdam has such extraordinary precedents to work from, both in the city and throughout the Netherlands. In vivid contrast to the negative tendencies of many cities throughout Europe, Holland has a long tradition, still very much alive, of compact efficient living, of moving around without the car, of an urbane lifestyle and of custodianship of a delicate setting that has rich lessons and totally applicable examples of how to do things right in the contemporary city. If I recommend nothing else, I would strongly recommend that Rotterdammers become astute students of their own historic settlements, not for their architectural style or heritage values, which are certainly great, but for their simple answers for how to build communities now to be liveable and competitive in the future. I only wish I had such vivid precedents to work from in Vancouver and Canada.

With that preamble, I will move to the important themes I want to explore for Rotterdam.



REGENERATION OF THE INNER CITY

Let me begin by looking at the theme of regeneration of the population of the inner city which is such a big aspiration for Rotterdam.

In Vancouver, our revival has been based on just such a strategy. This has been called a downtown “living first” strategy – this strategy for densification and revitalization of our metropolitan core is based on the proposition of drawing thousands of people into downtown residence to balance the natural inclination for commercial growth. The implementation of this strategy has been facilitated in a significant way because we had wonderful sites, including extraordinary waterfront sites, that became available in our generation to focus on the right kind of growth.

Fortunately, because of Rotterdam’s changing port needs, the city’s waterfront sites are also extraordinary. Huge areas are ready for redevelopment or are gearing up for that to happen.

Core regeneration happens through both push and pull factors for urban consumers: this is a formula to carefully manage the tendency and opportunity for suburbanization (essentially to push people back from suburban living choices); and the city has to create attractive city places that people prefer to move to and invest in (thus to pull, or maybe I should say entice, them toward the urban alternative).

I’m not going to focus on Rotterdam’s “push” factors in this report but I think it is obvious that this is about aggressive

regional land use and transportation management and tight control of loss of countryside.

For example, in the greater Vancouver region, government aggressively reserves all viable agricultural land, and it protects green space, and public policy clusters development. This doesn’t stop sprawl but it moderates its spread and it has shielded from settlement over 50% of Vancouver’s land mass for the respite needed by massive population.

For regional transportation, the cities and regional and provincial governments have had an accord to simply not build to further accommodate the car. There are no freeways fanning out from Vancouver’s core – people make do with the conventional street network. The City has maintained for many years a strong policy to limit auto capacity into the inner city – this policy specifies that not one additional lane for growing auto commuter traffic will be constructed. There is no question that cars have transformed urban life and, because of that, it is not surprising that they are at the heart of urban experience. But cars are also distorting cities in profound ways and they are diminishing the quality of citizens’ urban experience. The Vancouver idea has been to moderate the use and therefore the impact of the car and not to let auto standards and supposed “requirements” dominate urban design decisions – at any scale.

Of course, Vancouver’s investment is trying to catch up with Europe by adding more transit choices – better buses, more rapid transit, trolleys, ferries. The

result shows this can work: Vancouver actually has less cars coming into town now than was the case 20 years ago, even with all the growth the city has experienced.

In Rotterdam there are certainly regional planning objectives that are a matter of national discussion because of the limited size and land availability of the country. It is an urgent policy imperative to stave off suburbanization wherever possible, to try to save green land wherever possible, if not for agriculture then at least for environmental reasons and to keep the rural experience close by; and, wherever possible, to try not to give in to the modern tendency to defer more and more space within street rights-of-way and more resources within municipal budgets to the car. Giving more and more to the car to relieve congestion is simply an unwinnable battle. That is a worldwide conclusion.

The pull side of that formula for core regeneration is more difficult. This is all about creating attractive and fulfilling city places – for an attractive and fulfilling lifestyle. This is harder because it is all about consumer choices and preferences in a free society. Since the war, people have increasingly been taught that the suburban lifestyle and suburban places are what they should aspire to, especially when they start to couple and have children – or when they start to make more money. They have been taught that inner cities are either bad, and to be avoided, or of such great historic value that only the very rich can afford to reside there. Also, to be blunt,



most people hate density because it is usually so bad, so unpleasant, so inhuman.

But, of course, inner city redevelopment is primarily about densification, because of the limits of space, so to make it to any extent competitive with the suburban alternative, it needs to be done extraordinarily well. The quality has to be there. The diversity and wide choices have to be there. The supports and attractions have to be there. And solutions to the problem of moving around in a tight area have to be there.

Vancouver has achieved densification on a big scale. Here are the population numbers for the Downtown Peninsula, an area of approximately two square miles, beginning in 1986, the year of our famous international exposition, "Expo '86", and several years before the replanning process for the area got underway:

1986: 43,000 residents;
 1991: 47,000 residents;
 1996: 62,000 residents;
 2009: 105,000 residents,
 the most recent count; and,
 2021: 120,000+ residents, projected.

Essentially, the population of the downtown residential community has almost tripled in just 20 years, now standing at over 105,000 people. This is about high-rise development that gets lots of people and activities close together and gets them up to capture the wonderful views of mountains and water that everyone longs for in

Vancouver. However, I do what to emphasize that intensity does not require high-rise development – that was right for Vancouver but it is not necessarily right for other cities with different topography and different tastes; or, for that matter, right for even other parts of Vancouver. Low-rise and mid-rise buildings can achieve just as much intensity and there are many buildings in Rotterdam to prove that point.

Vancouver has density but to make it work requires very carefully planning and attention to specific design performance. There is a focus on mixed use, diversity and a great emphasis on meeting consumer specifications on quality; and the unit of the *neighbourhood* is the basic building block of the residential city.

This starts by making sure there is an adequate size for the social supports and local economics of the neighbourhood to work. The concept of the ecology of a neighbourhood economy is basic to creating places with the minimum drawing power of residential consumers to create the appropriate services and products and adequate choice. Jane Jacobs has written about this in her book, *The Economy of Cities*. Vancouver's standard for a viable neighbourhood is to have at least 10,000 people within a 5 to 7 minute walkable distance of the neighbourhood service centre and to be able to walk across the neighbourhood in about 20 minutes or less.

Then there is a specific focus on the neighbourhood provisions. Consumers make housing choices based on everything they need and want nearby, not just the pleasures of the unit. This includes all the amenities and services at hand in a local shopping "high street". Following are the standard amenities we require:

- parks,
- schools,
- childcares,
- public art
- library facilities,
- community centres, and,
- walkways and bikeways.

Moreover, following are the basic anchor commercial offerings of a neighbourhood centre:

- food store,
- pharmacy,
- liquor store,
- day-to-day shops and services, and,
- cafes and other meeting places.

The food store, pharmacy and liquor store are the essential core.

And, of course, the ambience of the neighbourhood gets special attention. Cars are not banned but traffic is calmed by having narrow streets and various traffic management measures. Vehicles are carefully tucked away in underground or above grade parking structures when not in use, rather than being parked on the streets, except for short-term curb-side parking. Parking standards are being pushed down as low as possible to bring housing costs down. People insist on ample parks and great



sidewalks, which I will come back to below, but there is also an emphasis on adequate private space in delightful enclosed courtyards, terraces and roof gardens.

An absolute public requirement is to achieve a social-economic mix of households in each neighbourhood, but the most attention of all is on measures to facilitate family housing. This is the hardest draw of all. I want to pause and concentrate on the issue of dense family housing because it is central to any plan to repopulate the core. Without families this will fail because most workers in the core come from households with small children. Also, there are not enough young singles and older “empty nesters” to create vibrant places and sustain a local economy. So Vancouver has special guidelines for family housing at high density and the local government requires 25% of all new dense housing to be designed to meet these guidelines. This deals with the unit, the project, nearby amenities and the overall quality of the neighbourhood. The guidelines and requirements are working - families are flooding back downtown in record numbers. The City recently concluded that there are over 8000 children on the Downtown Peninsula at last count. There is also a spin-off benefit that the planners discovered: if you design places that works well for children, they seem to work well for everyone else.

Densification is done in Vancouver with close attention to the actual detailed form and working of things to insure a very high quality of life because, otherwise, there can be some pretty unpleasant reactions that cause other consumers to stay away. Neighbourly building forms are emphasized, especially in regard to unit and window orientation and adjacencies. Building features are emphasized such as having special human interest at the sidewalk level, durable materials, lush landscaping, measures for security and noise abatement, creating what we call “neighbourhood areas of tranquility”, pervasive public art, and all those qualities of a community that affect peoples’ liveability moment to moment. As a top priority historic buildings are carefully preserved because heritage gives vital design cues for the austerity of modern architecture and the detailing of heritage buildings helps to keep any urban environment more gentle, less brutal. The formula works like this: the quality design allows the density to work, to be acceptable to citizens and attractive to consumers; the density generates great economic value and major profits; and this value also pays for amenities and facilities – all to create a truly urban lifestyle – and a much more sustainable lifestyle.

It has been emphasized to me that Rotterdam is also pursuing the repopulation of its inner city, partly because overall growth has stagnated, partly because more and more families are leaving Rotterdam for the suburbs and partly because local people have concluded that this is a smart economic development move that generates jobs (and I mean the right kind of jobs in construction and services and the creative sector) and can ultimately draw companies back to the city.

I fully endorse this strategy because I know that it works to achieve all the things I have just listed. So let me offer several thoughts to reinforce Rotterdam’s efforts.

First, to attract people back to live and invest in the city, as consumers, you have to create something special for them that they cannot get elsewhere and you have to meet a suite of their needs that are all too easily met elsewhere. And here, I don’t just mean “the theatre experience”, because people will come into the city occasionally for that anyway. And I don’t just mean a “cool urban experience” in a cafe or bar because people will get that during the day, working in the city, before they go home to the suburbs at night. I mean something extra special, which can become the theme around which you build a unique city experience of living. It’s the first thing I look for in any city that wants people to live there.



In Rotterdam's case I have concluded that there are three great assets that should be treasured on the one hand and fully drawn out on the other.

First, the inner city has magnificent bodies of water – not just one, but many. They are big; they have great memorable shapes; they have historic associations. And they have lots of developable areas along their many shorelines. There is simply nothing like them in the world, certainly not at Rotterdam's scale. The problem is that they are not very assessable or very well used right now. For obvious historic reasons, the city in the past turned its back on them and pulled away from them. But, now, to attract urban consumers, they need to be embraced. They need to be redesigned and humanized and repopulated at the waterfront edges. Development needs to be clustered close to the water where more density can easily be accommodated because of the respite of the water. The surface of the water needs to be used for housing and play and attractions and mobility. The glitter and reflection of the water should be used to enhance architecture by putting the city's best architectural creations on the water. Cars and utility must be moved away from the water and people and human activity must be moved close to the water. In a word, the water should be exploited for all it is worth as a focus of urban life.

The city's second unique asset is a spine of parks and green water links that

parallel the Coolsingel commercial spine from the central station to the water – Wijkpark Oude Westen and Museum Park and Euromast Park, along with the Westersingel street and canal. A very smart group in the city has realized the potential of this spine to become the garden for thousands of future inhabitants, within minutes walk from their homes. Fortunately, upgrading of the parks themselves is underway in several instances, in wonderfully creative interventions, like Rem Koolhaas's Kunsthal, which is all to the good. The difficulty now is that the parks are patently separated. And access to the parks is not fully realized because of severed linkages through the years. The City should make the full realization of this park spine a major civic initiative. This green spine should be considered comprehensively – a combination of parks and green streets, a pathway of public art, an alignment for localized community recreational facilities and a destination for east-west green links at a very localized level. For example, I recommend a major landscape architecture design competition for the corridor, outside the parks themselves, to tie everything together with artful and unique landscape and a string of interrelated public art.

The city's third unique asset is a constellation of existing neighbourhoods at a very domestic scale, all around the inner city – neighbourhoods like Cool and Oude Westen and Lijnbaan and Waterstad

and Laurenskwartier and even Katendrecht on the left bank. People in Rotterdam seem to be looking at many of these neighbourhoods as liabilities but, for me, they are essentially positive places. Yes, they have their individual problems and they definitely need care and attention but they are nonetheless a great asset. I would treasure these neighbourhoods and make them a top priority for rehabilitation. A neighbourhood-by-neighbourhood evaluation of the mix and balance of community services must be done in regard to both public facilities and private commercial offerings; along with creating a program to correct the obvious imbalances. A unit-by-unit program of building upgrading must be done rather than all or partial demolition. Because most of the housing is low-income social housing, not a bad thing in itself but very limiting for local commerce, I support the city's idea of diversifying the social and economic mix for a more robust consumer and citizen base to drive the localized economy of each neighbourhood – this can be done with little social or personal impacts on existing residents if it is done on the basis of natural vacancies. A strategic program of public realm upgrading in each area would assist to bring out their differences as places. The City should always try to save the historic fabric of these areas because it can be easily illustrated from examples in many places that the future wealth of properties and the value of the whole neighbourhood will ultimately rest on



the historic equity as much as the new equity. In at least one case, near Park Laan, this could even involve conversion of the area from an office district to a residential community in acknowledgement that the high office vacancy rates indicate that offices want to go elsewhere in any event. Offices in this area have been located in beautiful historic buildings that would convert to excellent and valuable housing. Potentially this is one of the nicest places to live in inner Rotterdam. In a word, the point is to save these treasured neighbourhoods as the vanguard and a design reference for the further population of the core city.

These are assets, but what interests me is that they can all fit together in a mutually reinforcing arrangement that could become a powerful magnet for consumers that could absolutely drive the repopulation of inner Rotterdam at a scale that has not been envisioned to date.

Let me describe what I mean. The City already has a progressive policy to create a high density spine north/south along Coolsingel from the vicinity of the central station and city hall to the water, and to some degree further south along Wilhelminapier and even into Katendrecht. I think this is an intelligent strategy and one that fits well with a future image for Rotterdam. It is also the perfect focus for a clustering of intensive housing for the inner city rather than to use the growth potential for more offices. A very large capacity of

housing could be accommodated in the planned high-rise spine. For that housing to be attractive, it needs three things: it needs to be experienced as a positive domesticated place in which to reside that has character and style; it needs to have an infrastructure of neighbourhood services; and, it needs to have accessibility to significant park green space. The existing neighbourhoods can give the design references for domesticity, certainly in regard to the street levels in the new area because the street levels of all this new development is actually going to be the base massing of very tall buildings. The existing communities can also offer the base of community services. One the other hand, the new dense housing spine should offer new consumer support for the existing neighbourhood facilities, assuming those neighbourhoods are well protected from over-scaled redevelopment pressures and inappropriate development intrusions. The new towers will also definitely make it economic to deliver day-to-day retail commercial services for which there is currently just not enough demand. The park and recreation corridor provides the essential green offering for the new community as well as the recreational facilities that will serve all residents and bring everyone together for friendship and mutual supports. The water provides a special focus where a lot of density can be associated with modest liveability challenges – think of the “Red Apple” replicated. Then, on the other hand, the new high density development could, with the right regulatory framework and

development management arrangements, offer the new wealth to invest in the upgrading of the green corridor and the new facilities that will be demanded. Everything would be in a symbiotic relationship.

The key is to start thinking about all of this holistically and to undertake a careful comprehensive plan for the entire area targeted specifically around the idea of people in residence. In fact, the local government needs a way to let people know about all the various sub-area plans that have already been generated for the city. Perhaps these can be put together into one comprehensive “Master Plan” for Rotterdam that will be more accessible to everyone. But, back to the specific planning of the inner city, in terms of methods, I would make this three pronged:

- A community planning process for the new dense residential spine;
- A rehabilitation program for existing neighbourhoods; and,
- A special urban design initiative to re-establish lost pedestrian linkages.

For the new dense spine, a community plan-making process is the right way to articulate all the dimensions of a model complete neighbourhood. This might even involve articulation of several neighbourhoods along the spine, according to how dense the City wants to go for this spine. For the existing neighbourhoods, a rehabilitation program process would facilitate upgrading of all aspects of these areas



incrementally but consistently on a sustained basis. A rehabilitation planning process such as is now going on in Katendrecht is what I have in mind.

Indeed, I truly admired this process for its integrity, sensitivity and innovations as well as the way the planners have worked with the existing community. It is a good model to follow for the other existing neighbourhoods. To connect everything tightly, targeted urban design action in the public realm to re-establish lost linkages would address what seems to be a special problem of Rotterdam because of the dikes and the pattern of post-war building. Integral with this could also be an agenda to create new linkages. The re-established and new linkages together would offer a maximum pedestrian and bicycle flow between housing and the green facilities.

I also think the neighbourhood unit is very essential for Rotterdam and I know a repopulation strategy will need to draw in lots of families. Several thoughts come to mind for new areas in addition to the comments I have already made about rehab of existing neighbourhoods.

I've noticed that the provision of community services, especially commercial services, in newer development areas has been somewhat spotty, so access is not great for many people – take Wilheminaapier as an example. In upcoming development areas this oversight must not be repeated. Major community service provisions have to be a priority and area

populations must be targeted to get enough people in close proximity to support those services.

Most of Rotterdam's denser housing is not suitable for children and has not been designed with this consumer in mind. But I have no doubt that local architects could be very creative if given this objective. A set of policies and guidelines is now under development by a group under the sponsorship of the City in Rotterdam, under the bannerhead of the "child-friendly city", and it will be absolutely essential to make these prerequisites for a significant component of future housing.

Which brings me to the last thing I want to say about this, which relates to the residential capacity in the inner city. I have been told that the City aspires to achieving 5000 new households within the next 5 years. I don't think that is enough. I think the government must think bigger and plan for a longer period out into the future in the repopulation and further population growth of the core city. With the assets I have described and very careful planning, I have no doubt that the city's geography has the capacity for 50,000 new households in inner Rotterdam, without the place being overly crowded. Also, that kind of capacity is needed to start to genuinely build a fresh market of consumer interest for inner city living and to get the attention of the consumer. Also, the City needs to support the high level of consumer services and facilities that new residents

are going to expect. And to achieve those kinds of numbers, there must be long term planning, there must be coordination of the phasing of change, enough land must be held to maintain the capacity for change as other activities also demand land and specific sites, and a smart public investment program must be generated that parallels and reinforces the massive private investment that will be necessary.

My message is:
from a planning perspective,
it is good to think big.



HIGH-RISES AND STREET LIFE

The previous statement is a good segway into my second major theme for Rotterdam, because I also want to offer the opposite message.

From a design perspective, it is good to think small.

My second theme has to do with high-rises and street life – how do you handle tall buildings without losing the gentle human scale and fascinating interest that people long for at the sidewalk level?

There are two inherent issues for the tower form. How the towers locate and fit with one another and within their setting is one set of questions. What happens at the ground level along the sidewalk is another set of questions.

In Vancouver the prevailing form is the tall thin tower because bigger slab buildings tend to block out views and sun. Tower floorplates are kept very small, around 650 square metres maximum. An ample separation is required between towers of at least 25 metres so people can see around them and also maintain relative privacy. But also, towers are clustered together rather than being randomly spread within lower height settings where they can be very intrusive. The City has also taken a policy position in regard to the overall skyline. Vancouver's skyline is sculpted to protect key public viewsheds and corridors and to shape the skyline as a work of art against the mountain backdrop.

The base condition of tall buildings relates to both the configuration of the building and the treatment of the adjacent and nearby public realm. Scale is always problematic at the ground plane, so in Vancouver, a coherent, dominant street wall is always provided, with the bases of tower buildings above about six stories shielded from the sidewalk to cut their powerful impacts. The result is a tower/podium form that shapes the street but still has building identity. This is how big buildings can be humanized. Also active residential use is brought right down to the sidewalk level as often as possible – fostering the 'shop-house' form where it makes sense but more often providing row houses to truly domesticate the street. Blank walls are not supported. Many methods are used to animate and enliven the street including doors and porches and stoops and windows and almost any engaging detail down at eye level. Weather protection is an absolute requirement along commercial routes. If parking is above grade, it is definitely not allowed at grade and it is fully camouflaged. Essentially, within those first six floors, the idea is to create the fascinating, intimate experience that engenders a strong sense of place, comfort, domesticity, civility, safety and vivid memory.

The result of all of this for streetscapes is that they are active and they are interesting. The street is the focus of public life so streets are embellished with grass boulevards and a double or triple row of trees and lush landscaping along with paving and furnishings to

make the streetscapes amenable for human life and to screen the density. This is where it becomes important to throw away the old 1950's traffic standards so the width of streets can be minimized and the cross-section treatment can be adjusted to maximize pedestrian activity.

The shape and character of public open space are also vital. Urban design policy in Vancouver does not support useless private plazas and random "left over" spaces. Instead, building mass and edges are used to give memorable form to public park spaces and squares – and these spaces are embellished with public art and artful landscape design. The emphasis is on tightening up vague spaces which is a key aspect of placemaking. Sun and shade related to new buildings is carefully managed to keep public places warm in Vancouver's cool climate and therefore as comfortable as possible.

I strongly commend these kinds of design moves in Rotterdam. While there is a fine and delicate streetscape texture and scale in the older neighbourhoods, the post-war building fabric is not as giving to the street and current projects seem to miss this consideration. This is very easy to fix.

First, for the building edges, a simple set of guidelines would help that make it clear that all the edges of all buildings will have either retail windows and entrances, or housing doors and stoops, or fine-scaled artistic treatments, or landscape, or an



architectural pattern and articulation that are engaging.

Second, the City of Rotterdam has put together a very clever “city lounge” concept that is very strong and can surely replenish the charm and attractiveness of the public realm. A program of refurbishing of streetscapes can go a long way to regenerate investment value as well as community contentment. I would add a major program of urban reforestation of city streets. Adding 50,000 trees to inner-Rotterdam, where many streets are now bare of green would do wonders. I would also select at least one main boulevard, perhaps it is Coolsingel, and completely redesign the cross-section to add pedestrian activity space, and landscape space as soon as possible. I would do a similar thing to at least one smaller street in each of the older neighbourhoods, such as is now being done in Katendrecht, to show a firm commitment to these places and to show how dramatic the improvements can be. I can tell you from experience, one planted tree is worth more than all the drawings and all the talk in the world in making people see the benefits of good urban design. These would be the strongest market signals to new housing consumers that inner Rotterdam is available to move back to and good to move back to.

Third, Rotterdam has a wonderful collection of historic buildings that no one seems to have really thought much about: the early post-war

“international style” modernist buildings. A smart move for the long-term quality of Rotterdam is to inventory and preserve these buildings and build up a culture of understanding about these buildings and the things that can be done sensitively to retrofit these buildings for reuse tomorrow. For example, I think the Lijnbaan is an extraordinary complex of shops, housing and courtyards that is iconic of its period, continues to have great potential value today and, if properly restored and retrofitted, would be a very hip offering for future consumers who are coming back to the city to live – and a very profitable venture because of its heritage edge. I would definitely save the Lijnbaan. There are many other similar examples.

In regard to Rotterdam’s towers, I suggest a different approach than that we have pursued in Vancouver. In my city, we were not as blessed with great architects, so we looked to the ensemble of architecturally coordinated buildings to give the skyline the kind of visual impacts that can be so iconic to a city’s image. In contrast, Rotterdam has some of the greatest architectural talent in the world and this design community has a culture of architectural experimentation and expression. The city should take advantage of that. I think Rotterdamers should see their skyline as a gallery of individual architecture. With due respect for the obvious performance considerations, I think the municipal government should sponsor the greatest possible freedom of expression for architects to “do their stuff” with the taller buildings in

Rotterdam. The stylishness and cleverness of the buildings is already a singular impression that one has of Rotterdam, so that can easily become one of the primary experiences and memories of the city in the future – an experience at the heart of the re-branding of the city.

Having said this, perhaps there is a reciprocal responsibility that can be asked of the architects. As a profession, they have to adopt the public program of quality and progressive urbanism that has been described – and be an advocate for it with their clients. There are polemical themes that drive many architects’ work but they can go beyond those polemics – beyond the project-focussed “formgiving” that often dominates the design of a single building. A concept of community form and community linkages and community program must be brought in to augment the private design program that now dominates their thinking and that public program must become a major driver of their design solutions. Every new building must make a tangible contribution to the streetscapes in which it sits. I have often said that architects are in the very best position to manage a program of both public and private objectives, and citizen objectives, and to reconcile those objectives. Here in Rotterdam, because the tradition of design is so strong, this represents a perfect opportunity to model how an integrated approach might happen and to teach the world how to also do it.



COOPERATIVE PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT MANAGEMENT

Now, let's turn to the final theme of my commentary on Rotterdam – a collaborative approach to planning and development management. In Vancouver we call this the “cooperative planning” model. Cooperative planning is all about transcending the history of confrontation between civic authorities, the private sector, and citizens that has been the reality of municipal affairs in North America for far too long. It's about setting up the planning and development management system for a win-win scenario that is profitable, facilitates a great city and serves the special concerns of citizen interest groups.

As it happens, Rotterdam and Vancouver have a similar approach on many aspects of our processes. Both cities have deliberate planning and a tradition of strong policy making. Both cities also have expert involvement in plan review and decisions on development while depoliticizing day-to-day development approvals. In addition to that, Vancouver does several other things that may be of interest in Rotterdam.

First, the City has a highly discretionary regulatory framework emphasizing guidelines and incentives over hard regulation. This allows the creation of wealth for a development through the application of our regulations which makes the process easier to cope with from a financial perspective. Conventional regulations eat up wealth so it is not surprising that they are often resented, even if a developer can understand what the government is trying to achieve.

Second, the municipal government and developers join public and private forces around a table in a shared activity of design, at the moment of creation of a scheme, so that proposals can be shaped to respond better to many needs and to balance public and private objectives that balance profitability and liveability. The civic government also coordinates municipal input on a proposal so a developer hears one voice and has one point of bureaucratic contact.

From the wealth created through incentives in the form of increments of added-on development capacity, there derives the ability for new development to pay for the public infrastructure that is demanded by that development. This has become the prime way to fund localized public amenities and facilities, acknowledging the reality that a municipality simply cannot carry all the burden of growth from general taxes. But this “leveraging” process also carefully respects developer profits, because, otherwise, development will not proceed. This is done through added increments in land value that are then shared with the public sector, all driven by what we call the “magic of a real *quid pro quo*”.

Now, Rotterdam might benefit from this kind of public/private collaboration. In fact, this is already happening in the planning of Katendrecht and for the new development around the Central Station. In these two circumstances, strong collaboration is underway, facilitated by the City, and the results tell a very good story. Expanding this approach could

yield significant benefits. Also, Rotterdam might want to explore the incentive-based regulatory system with connected requirements for public goods because, right now, civically funded public realm projects lag behind the private projects they are meant to serve and enhance. If the City can tap into a source of funds that is available at the same time that private investment happens, then coordinated delivery of an urban setting could take place that would be very much appreciated by urban consumers.



FINAL THOUGHTS

To close, I want to add one final thought. Many people have told me that Rotterdam needs and wants to refresh its civic image as perceived by its citizens and the rest of the world. History has given the city an image that may not be optimal for a competitive city in the future, especially one that wants to draw new population back into the core city to invest and live. But images can be changed. There is no better way I know to attack this than to undertake a very loud and engaging public process of planning for a newly revitalized residential city in the future. People learn many things from this process and they contribute many things, but a top message they surely absorb and pass on to others is that the City means business and intends to make positive change happen. This just naturally changes their perceptions and the new vision spreads like wildfire.

I have heard talk about a revamped image based on youthful energy and verve, being at the “cutting edge” and generating a significant component of the future livelihood of this community from the creative industries. Because housing prices are still relatively modest, the city can well accommodate most up-and-coming creative people, so this is not only a realistic rebranding potential, but it is close to what could actually happen. That is certainly the history in Vancouver. By convening a rich community dialogue around the various planning strategies that are under consideration, the local government can foster a communication “buzz” – and

then watch how that buzz echoes around the world.

This brings me to my final commentary. Vancouver may offer important lessons for a place that has not yet succumbed to some of the worst aspects of the modern city. Vancouver did not go the way of freeways or the commercially dominated core or deregulation. It has not shied away from dense development; and the civic government uses strong engagement to make sure every building contributes to our collective community vision for the city. We foster profitability and harness the energy that comes from that for both private and public benefit.

I hope the creative dialogue now underway throughout this city will set the right direction for Rotterdam’s continued transformation. My experience in just one week has confirmed for me vividly that Rotterdam enjoys a setting of beauty, a history of good examples and a pool of amazing talent and good will that can only serve the city well. I cannot see any fundamental roadblocks.

Vancouver’s experience and Rotterdam’s experience are both stories about struggling for smart, sustainable growth in the face of seemingly overwhelming trends of contemporary urbanism. We know that urbanism does not deliver what it promises. Instead, I urge Rotterdammers to foreswear those trends and build their city to a higher set of goals and with a particular fit to its

landscape and environment. This will position Rotterdam well in the increasing competition among cities for the wealth and energy that is out there in a footloose world; and this will position Rotterdam to be fondly embraced by the entire community at home – and perhaps this is the greatest achievement of all.



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Deze tekst is op basis van de 'keynote lecture' van Larry Beasley, uitgesproken op de Dag van der Leeuw, maandag 28 september 2009 in Hotel New York te Rotterdam. Larry Beasley was op uitnodiging van de Van der Leeuwkring in Rotterdam van woensdag 23 tot dinsdag 29 september 2009.

De Van der Leeuwkring bestaat uit Rotterdamse ondernemers die actief zijn in de stedelijke vernieuwing en -ontwikkeling. Vanuit het private opdrachtgeverschap en persoonlijke betrokkenheid bij de stad Rotterdam willen zij bijdragen aan een vitale Rotterdamse publieke ruimte.

De Van der Leeuwkring is een initiatief van AIR, hét architectuurcentrum van Rotterdam.

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Samenstelling en redactie: AIR, www.airfoundation.nl

Fotografie: Jos Stoopman (beelden Rotterdam), Dorien de Wit (beelden Vancouver)

Ontwerp: [stoopmanvos](http://stoopmanvos.com), www.stoopmanvos.nl

Oktober 2009