

Empower people to make the city

Contribution made by Adri Duivesteijn, member of the Senate of the Dutch Parliament (Dutch Labour Party), for the Birmingham Policy Commission on Future Urban Living, The Hague, 2013-10-13

1. What are the major challenges facing future urban living in the UK?

It is a well-known fact that, in the next couple of decades, cities will face substantial growth; by 2050 70% of the world population will live in cities. The quality of life therefore is increasingly dependent on the quality of our cities. This process of urbanization also takes place in the Netherlands. An increasing amount of people move to the city, and in the future our cities will remain the heart of economic life. We see that for example in the city of Groningen – the city continues to grow, while the province as a whole is shrinking dramatically.

Urbanization means that the shape of our cities will change. There will no longer be (more or less) isolated cities, as the red counterpart of the green countryside. Instead, we see a more metropolitan development, leading to large urban fields or conglomerates. In economic perspective, these fields or conglomerates will function as a whole, but their inhabitants will not necessarily consider them as coherent areas.

Another important trend, visible in both the Netherlands and abroad, is the desire to create cities that are sustainable and self-sufficient. This is ideologically driven rather than based on pragmatic grounds; over the years we alienated from what is traditionally close to us, and people seem to want it back. It is not just about housing, but also about our food production or the way we generate energy. There is a growing resistance towards the often-inefficient ways these processes are organized, to the large-scale production and the anonymity that is the inevitable result.

I'm not an expert on future urban living in the United Kingdom. But what I think the biggest challenge will be, both in the Netherlands and in the UK, is to give the responsibility of making cities (back) to the people that live in it. Let the city be the property of the population; stimulate people to build their own house, to grow their own food and to provide in their own (source of) energy.

2. What is your vision for your city (or cities generally) for 2050?

Unlike other countries, the Netherlands never made people the driving force in urban planning. We are used to living in a welfare state, where people are taken care of – even if hundred years of education, emancipation and individualization make those people perfectly capable to take care of themselves. Even today, the policy of housing is in the hands of government, while housing associations and urban developers are responsible for the actual implementation.

In qualitative terms, this tradition brought little good. The product that is created by institutions is fundamentally different than what people would create when they get the possibility to shape their own living environment. We see that in countries like Belgium and the United States, where citizens have always played a major role in urban development; they created neighbourhoods which are more than the sum of

houses, and where the appearance of each house tells us a lot about the identity of the resident(s). When we look further back into our own history, we also see it in the city of Amsterdam. The Canal Zone might be the best illustration of the fact that people are capable to make the city. Although there was a strict grid, formed by the town council, the actual creation was left to the people. Enterprising citizens built a house or workplace that represented their own needs and met their own budget. The Canal Zone grew organically. Sometimes it took years for a plot to be filled. All in all, the Amsterdam Canal Zone shows an unprecedented diversity, and has proven to be resistant to changes over time.

Basically, the Dutch tradition in urban planning has taken the soul out of housing. Housing has become a mass product, a commercial activity, and the people are reduced to (being) housing *consumers*. As indicated in response to the first question, I think the major challenge is to end this alienation; people must be given the opportunity to be housing *producers*.

I've seen first hand that this is possible. In the city of Almere (> 200,000 inhabitants), where I was responsible for the urban development from 2006 through 2013, we've started a program called 'I build my house in Almere'. This program implied – and still implies – a direct relationship between the municipality and the inhabitants. In the policy of housing, the demand is the focal point. It's about what people want; about their ideas, desires and fantasies. We have renounced blueprints, and created a framework instead – like they did in Amsterdam centuries ago. The results are starting to become visible. Since 2006, over 2,000 plots were sold. This number includes 500 so-called 'I build affordable in Almere' plots, meant for lower income households (households with an annual income between € 20,000 and € 36,500).

I have shared my experiences with this self-build housing program in the document I sent earlier ('Eleven Experiences of Almere's daily practice').

3. What are the risks and uncertainties around achieving your vision for 2050?

I believe that cities are malleable. Time and again it are human decisions that shape our cities. It gives urban planners the possibility to bring their ideals into practice. This is also a risk: the creation of the city is never without obligations. Generations to come will grow up in cities that are made today, and the responsibility of city making must therefore be handled with great care. Against this background, the question is not whether cities *can* be made, but *how* they are made and by *whom*.

The biggest risk around empowering people to make the city is that institutional powers are too strong to give way to self-organization. It can be expected that commercial parties hold on to housing *for* the people; even in time of financial crises, housing is a moneymaking machine. I would rather see the institutional world let people participate in urban life; that the focus is on creating physical and mental space for housing *by* the people. This requires a fundamentally different attitude from politicians and urban planners (see 5). It's a real risk that decision-makers are unwilling or unable to make this change in attitude.

4. What characteristics should future urban centres have if they are to be effective places to live, work and play?

Many urban developments are taken over by 'large-scale economy', meaning that our city centres are primarily built on formal economic structures; the same chain stores are dominating almost every city centre. This leads to a decrease of the adaptive capacity of cities. There is hardly any space (left) for small and medium-sized businesses, and a gradual, more organic transformation is no longer possible. As a result our city centres become interchangeable, colourless, anonymous – and thus less attractive.

In order to create attractive urban centres, I do not think we should focus on commercial functions; instead, I believe that art and culture are important ingredients for living and liveable cities. Public space therefore plays a major role in future city life – it is where art and culture are put into practice. Public space also functions as social cement; it gives people the opportunity to meet each other. Even in a time in which it is easy to stay in contact without actually leaving your house, direct encounters remain the basis of society. This is why we should focus on creating an infrastructure that stimulates people to meet – basically a motor behind informal structures. The most important question is how we are able to do this in a way that adds quality to the city, i.e. using art and culture as key ingredients.

The new Birmingham library is a good example of a positive intervention. It restores the city in a non-commercial way. The library is primarily built for the people of Birmingham, and functions as a place that appeals and contributes to a person's knowledge and creativity. It illustrates that good use of the public domain can make people want to engage and participate.

5. What changes need to be made, in for example governance, policy, public/private sector relationships, to ensure an acceptably good quality future urban living can be achieved for all?

An important assignment that politicians and urban planners face nowadays is to search for a new planning culture and forge new coalitions. The key, I think, is to aim for *facilitating cities*; in my opinion, the facilitating city should be the main principle of urban planning.

The city of the future is a city that respects the existing initiatives of citizens and stimulates them to come up with new ones. Aristotle described the citizen as *citoyen* in society. Society is not something that happens to them; it is shaped by them, individually or collectively. Richard Florida, professor Business and Creativity at the University of Toronto, puts it as follows: "Our most important resource is us. Or to be more precise, the creative potential that is in every human being."¹ More than ever people are capable to give meaning to their own lives, to shape their own physical and social environment. The Zeitgeist brings (the domination of) top down planning to a halt. Instead, we need to develop structures or mechanisms – basically a more adaptive way of urban planning – that challenges people to be active and creative.

¹ Richard Florida, *It's Up To The Cities To Bring America Back*, Business Insider, February 2012

How can we do that? The main condition for a different planning culture is an open mind-set of politicians and urban planners. They must be welcoming the paradigm shift, meaning letting go of traditional patterns (large-scale versus small scale, all at once versus gradual, inflexible versus flexible, supply-driven versus demand-driven, impersonal versus personal, maximization of profit versus maximization of living/housing).

In summary: when it comes to housing, people should be considered producers. DIY or the right to self-organize should structurally be a guiding principle. This means that the scale of spatial interventions must be adapted to the investment possibilities of private entrepreneurs. It also means that the role of the government should be limited to setting frameworks, basically the boundaries of the playing field in which people can be active, and breaking down barriers – for example by reducing the amount of laws and regulations. Empower people to make the city.

6. What might be expected of us, collectively or individually, to make future urban living work?

See former answers.