

urban futures - the cultural field

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For nearly ten years I have been serving on the International Advisory Board in Rotterdam [Link] - offering comment on the city's life and plans.

This year we turned to culture in the city. A group of us joined a year long process to reach out to stakeholder groups and institutions, to the people of Rotterdam to listen, to bring us all together to reflect upon what might be done to culturally enrichen the city.

When I first joined the Board it was primarily, and appropriately, concerned with economic development in this biggest oil port in the world and the shipping gateway to Europe. It is now lost on no one that cultural values, personal, class, ethnic, gender and community identities, cultural movements, indeed cultural heritage lie at the heart of political economy. Shifts in employment, jobs, manufacturing, corporate culture connect with an IT facilitated "gig" economy (and all its implications), challenges to empower people and organizations to be open and flexible, emphasizing the need more than ever for us to embrace life long learning, a culture of learning. Great movements, migrations of people are again shaking up comfortable notions of roots and belonging. Cultural diversity is ever more apparent as an issue in a globalist connected world. Nearly 200 languages are spoken in Rotterdam.

How might we put people and their cultures first in our collective efforts to face the future with creative competency?

This is a key agenda item in our Foresight and Innovation group within Stanford's Center for Design Research - our Urban Futures project.

Is it a matter of cultural "policy"? Well, of course, this is part of the landscape of national and city governance. Though a common notion is that of the "cultural sector", we emphasized that culture is not just the arts and arts institutions, while addressing how the city, the municipality with its elected representatives and executive might look to cultural policy. And public subsidy for the arts, for example, is substantial in the Netherlands.

Above all, and this is what I really appreciated, is the cultural vitality of the city. This shows in its history - the rebuilding after the Second World War that has encompassed extraordinary architectural manifestation this last 20 years, and continues with the new Collections Depot for Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen [Link]. It shows in the informal cultures as well as the institutions, businesses and many organizations like V2 or MVRDV, the extraordinary small studios and creative businesses I have been so lucky to meet over the years.

Vitality suggests energy, and this we highlighted in our report. What is "appropriate" cultural energy? We introduced the importance of "authenticity" - a concept contested precisely, I suggest, because of its importance. Above all "energy" - a dynamic capacity to act creatively - relates to agency - the capacity to simply get things done. We must always ask awkward questions of agency - who is being empowered, and to what ends?

Culture is well conceived as an energy "field" - charged, intersecting, vectors of connection and connectivity, of potentialities and realizations within which our experiences, our creative efforts take shape and form.

And such a cultural field is not at all necessarily harmonious, of course. Electro-cultural charges can interfere with each other. Disagreement is the heart of diversity. We suggested the city take all this well into account - looking to foster manifolds of networking and interconnectivity - the conversations and collaborations that are our cultural milieu.

Here is the report.

Recommendations of the Expert Edition of the International Advisory Board:
the IABx 2017 on Culture



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