

A THIRTY-YEAR VISION FOR THE URBAN FABRIC

a conversation with Adriaan Geuze

Good plinths are a cornerstone of the European city. We need to go back to thinkers like Jane Jacobs and H.P. Berlage in The Netherlands for a conceptual framework for urban design:

- social diversity, a mix of poor and rich;
- marking the public realm, the collective;
- dignity for everyone;
- car traffic is never dominant but nicely fits into the urban fabric;
- a dense urban fabric with good streets.

A THIRTY-YEAR STREET VISION

Truly changing and improving plinths in an existing urban structure, especially one like the post-war reconstruction city centre of Rotterdam, takes at least three generations. The key here is to create the conditions for plinths to function by restoring a dense structure, the “tissue urbaine”. This requires a long-term vision and a deep understanding of how the city has developed over the centuries.

A city must have continuity of the historic east-west and north-south connections. These should, as Jane Jacobs says, be seen more from the point of view of the pedestrian and the cyclist. This needs to be done at a higher scale than the city centre only. For instance, in Rotterdam, the surrounding areas Kop van Zuid, Oude Westen, Crooswijk and Oostplein should be seen

as part of the centre. The post-war design of Van Traa has disrupted the connections between the historic inner city triangle and Crooswijk and Rotterdammers were cut off from the river. We need much more dense north-south connections, like Rotterdam had from the city to the river before the war, but which were eliminated by the large scale blocks of the modernist reconstruction plan. Such a long-term vision is needed so that each time a project takes place in the next decades, it is used to improve the density of the urban fabric (and bring back more north-south routes). We must understand the historic structures of the city.

THE URBAN FABRIC

Another part of this long-term vision is how the city treats its larger scale connecting streets. Boulevards must be understood at a higher level than the way they are treated now. The boulevards of Rotterdam are coherent for the length of about 400 to 500 meters. That is too short to truly function as a boulevard. They should be stretched much further on, and they should be designed based on one design regime for the whole boulevard. They should also carry one name.

Creating a dense urban fabric creates the conditions for success within the streets. This requires not only a practical approach in the streets, but also a long-term vision for using unknown urban interventions of the next 30 years to gradually improve the urban fabric.

TRAFFIC SPACE AND CAR STREETS

Traffic schemes can be awful. Too often, streets are designed from a functional perspective, rather than a more holistic, human scale approach. It leads to streets that are too wide. Lanes should have a width of 54 meters or maximum 60 meters. In the modern city, it is easy to find 100 m, sometimes even 200 m wide streets. That is simply too much space to function as an intimate fabric. Adding new building in those streets and thus narrowing it, will create exciting new streets for the city.

This should not be understood as a plea against the car, rather the contrary. Living, working, shopping, recreation and traffic should be mixed as much as possible, according to Jane Jacobs. The car belongs in the fabric, provided it is not too dominant. Streets where cars have been are completely dead at night and people avoid these streets. It is precisely allowing all flows through the city that creates urban bustle.

A NEW URBAN DESIGN TRADITION

Modernist inner cities are deserts. At night you walk through them and think: this city hates women, elderly, children, and disabled persons. Interventions in the city should take place with much more sense for these users. A well-functioning city centre needs a middle class of higher educated families with children. In too many cases city centres do not service these target group.

A city needs more than just good architecture; it needs good urban design as well, based on a historic understanding. In a city like Rotterdam, a lot has been destroyed after the War. New high-rise can be part of the city centre, but not if they have a poorly designed plinth that kills the area around them.

We need a new tradition in urban design, supported by designers who live and work in the city itself. The local authority must develop skills for the specific work on the inner city, and consider urban design a craft that needs an eye for decisive details.

ORGANISE RESISTANCE

If we change a street, talk with local entrepreneurs first. There is too much top-down thinking, thinking it is good to throw cars out of the streets. Streets will be open for construction for months and after some time you can see the special entrepreneurs disappear. They will never return, and by doing so, the street has been effectively destroyed.

It is not only the local authority's organisation, of course. A crucial role for the city centre is played by how the city's elites and people's voices involve themselves in the development of the city. In Amsterdam, there is debate about each new building in the city centre. Sometimes it takes long, but resistance eventually leads to good urban design.