Urban Europe

Marini, Gioia, van Wageningen, Anne, Mamadouh, Virginie

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21. Visions and symbols of the creative city

From the patroness of the city to the 3D Print Canal House

Claartje Rasterhoff

North Amsterdam is home to the 3D Print Canal House, a prestigious ‘research-by-doing’ project that involves constructing a typical canal side property using 3D printing. If the architects and sponsors involved in the initiative have their way, this experiment will be the city of the future in microcosm: sustainable, socially-conscious and creative. Perfectly reflecting the zeitgeist, it is also an exhibition and event space, where the public can contribute ideas and watch live as a huge printer, the KamerMaker (RoomBuilder), produces the new building materials and designs.

Artist’s impression of the 3D Print Canal House

Source: DUS Architects, Amsterdam
The project is also a symbol of the Amsterdam Economic Board’s ambition of being Europe’s number one creative metropolis by 2020. Why has it set itself this goal? Because urban creativity attracts and promotes economic activity and innovation, which in turn benefits the city and its residents. At least, that is the idea behind the creative city. Amsterdam policymakers are not the first to have big aspirations for their city, nor are they the first to bank on art and culture to make these goals a reality. But is it possible to plan a creative city? Or is wishful thinking ultimately the best that you can do? History suggests the latter. The question is whether that is such a bad thing.

Art and trade

Is it a coincidence that the 3D Print Canal House is on the very same site that was used, four hundred years ago, by cultural entrepreneurs avant la lettre Claes Jansz. Visscher and Pieter Bast to represent the city’s grandeur – right on the bank of the river IJ across from the current location of Amsterdam Central Station? On this print from 1611, we see the Amsterdam city skyline from the north, looking east to west. Recently, the cityscape had undergone significant changes as a result of the first drawing-board plans for urban expansion becoming a reality, giving shipping and trade in particular more space reaching both eastwards and westwards. The image is dominated by the IJ, the city’s artery, with countless ships bobbing along on its surface. Also striking are the exotically-dressed foreigners offering their goods. The city’s buildings are prominently featured, with iconic sites and institutions such as the recently-established Stock Exchange, Dam Square and the Fish Market (Vismarkt). The patroness of the city of Amsterdam sits in the centre, holding the city’s coat of arms and a model ship in her hands. She receives her guests among an array of cultural artefacts, including a globe, nautical instruments, sheet music, a painter’s palette, silver and glassware and a copy of the New Testament. In the accompanying texts, we
can read about the library, where books in all languages could be consulted, about the presence of scholars and schoolteachers, about the many maps of places all over the world and about artistic prints by the greatest masters.

The emphasis on art, culture and science in this print symbolises the city’s status as a patron of the arts and centre of human creativity. At the same time, the print represents art and science as being the foundations of urban development, referring to what we would now call cultural entrepreneurship and spill overs. Art and science served as both a honey pot and a fuel, and were invaluable tools in promoting the city and legitimising its administrative and policymaking decisions. For example, we can read the following words in Latin: ‘Piety, trade, art, science and government spread Amsterdam’s name all over the world.’ The makers of this 1611 print were appealing to the egos of the new administrative elite. They did not only depict the city as they saw it, but also its future: Amsterdam as it could be, or even as it should be. And lo and behold, their visions became a reality, as evidenced by the impressive commercial and artistic achievements of the Dutch Golden Age.

About half a century after this print was made, the patroness of the city was once again prominently depicted. Her seat, the new city hall – now known as the Royal Palace of Amsterdam
was constructed between 1648 and 1665. Its marble floors are inlaid with maps that depict Amsterdam as the centre of the cosmos, the world and world trade. This display of the wealth and power of the city government was intended to send a clear signal to other local authorities: good luck trying to come up to this level! Although Amsterdam boasted a prominent commercial position by then, this colossal building could also be seen as a dream of the future. Unfortunately, the second half of the 17th century did not bring the grandeur that the city government had been hoping for. It turned out that many economic sectors had reached the limits of their growth, while other European cities were on the rise. While Amsterdam managed to retain its position as a significant trade hub and financial centre for a long time, the country entered a period of relative stagnation. For example, the eastern part of the city, which had been prepared for construction for the envisaged urban expansion of 1662, remained strikingly empty until well into the 19th century.

Art and manufacturing

It was not until the mid-19th century that the city truly began making new plans for urban expansion and improvement again. All over Europe, cities were working on parks, boulevards and public facilities. Of course, Amsterdam could not lag behind. New buildings, new streets and entire new neighbourhoods were constructed. At the same time, the city's economic, social and cultural foundations were also subject to change and transformation. The new plans for Amsterdam were developed during a time characterised by frequent complaints about there being a lack of entrepreneurial spirit and innovative drive in the Netherlands, with people arguing that its past achievements had led the country, the city and the economy to become complacent. However, in the eyes of urban planner Samuel Sarphati, who was the driving force behind a number of large-scale urban construction projects, it was not a lack of drive among merchants and manufacturers
that was holding back Dutch progress so much as an overall lack of knowledge and capital. A series of new initiatives were undertaken with the intention of changing this. The *Paleis voor Volksvlijt* (Palace of National Industry) – which burned down in 1929 but was recently put back on the Urban Agenda by Dutch artist Wim T. Schippers – was supposed to play a crucial role in this. Sarphati dreamt of an unrivalled building which would promote and showcase progress in trade, manufacturing, art and science:

[A building] that, in its dimensions, exceeds all other buildings in this city, a forecourt bigger than Dam Square, with a fountain, candelabras and tasteful planting, flanked by two rows of large, elegant houses facing onto streets more than twice as wide as Reguliersbreestraat and longer than Kalverstraat, will create such a vista that many other capital cities will envy us.

Opened in 1864, the palace ended up being built on *Frederiksplein*, at the site that is now the location of *De Nederlandsche Bank*, and its completion marked the dawn of a new era. Like London’s renowned Crystal Palace, this impressive palace of industry was constructed out of glass and cast iron, and was 1.5 times the size of the Royal Palace of Amsterdam, with a dome that towered high above the rest of the city.

Like the print from 1611, the palace represented both the ideal and the reality. In this period, the relationship between culture – including urban culture – and economy was re-examined. The dominant belief was that, like the classical *Mercator Sapiens*, merchants and manufacturers should not strive for economic gains alone, but should also invest in society, in particular in art and science – not just for their own consumption, but for the benefit of society as a whole. This resulted in the construction of showpieces such as the *Concertgebouw* (home of the Amsterdam Philharmonic), the *Stedelijk Museum* Amsterdam and the *Paleis voor Volksvlijt*. These projects were driven by civilising ideals
– art to educate the public – but also by economic motivations – art as a stimulus for industry and trade. People often felt that machine-made products were ugly, and increasingly began to call for the integration of art and industry. The idea was that it was possible to gain an edge over competitors by having good designs and beautiful decoration. Industry, science and art had to be developed jointly, through exhibitions and associations for art and industry, such as in the Paleis voor Volksvlijt. This would make it possible to develop the public’s taste by presenting the rewards of progress, while at the same time stimulating the demand for products.

From the mid-19th century, employing culture, art, science and innovation began to play a more prominent role in the competition between cities and countries through, among other things, large-scale buildings and exhibitions. The Paleis voor Volksvlijt itself was a particularly fine example of promotion for the city. In spite of the drive of the initiators and the palace’s success as an impressive feat of architecture, the domains of art and industry ended up drifting further apart during the course of the 19th century. The use of art and creativity in industrial production largely remained limited to style and embellishment, partly as a result of an increasing, newfound appreciation for craftsmanship and decoration. Industrial design would not really get off the ground in the Netherlands until the 20th century. And it turned out that it was difficult to make the palace itself profitable, and as a result the emphasis in its programming shifted from industrial exhibitions to trade exhibitions and a role as a venue for events. Thanks to this increasing consumer function and the prominent location in the city, it ended up becoming an important part of Amsterdam as a cultural city after all.

Creative industry

Art, culture and science had an important place in the pre-industrial and industrial city, just as they do today. Whether they
were tools for marketing the city, legitimising administrative and policymaking decisions or product differentiation, art and culture were taking shape in tandem with urban society, and helped to put cities on the map. At the end of the 20th century, this utilitarian approach was formalised in the concept of the ‘creative city’. For post-industrial societies, it turned out that it was difficult to compete with low-wage economies based on labour and raw materials. What industrialised cities could use to set themselves apart was knowledge, information, highly-developed skills, cultural heritage and the ability to give scope to individual creativity. The only thing that was missing was a way to get access to, and extract, these new raw materials. Working with policymakers, academics considered the question of the conditions that were needed for creativity to flourish and be transformed into commercial products. It turned out that cities offered all sorts of benefits compared to the countryside, such as a developed infrastructure and demand side, while social and geographical proximity strengthened the exchange of knowledge and cross-pollination that are the prerequisites for innovation and growth. The 3D Print Canal House is not one isolated project, but makes up part of the IJ bank, a centre of creative production and consumption by tourists, knowledge workers and creatives with relatively high incomes, including institutions such as the EYE Film Institute Netherlands, new media and technology hub A Lab, the new A’DAM tower and the Amsterdam Theatre School.

There is nothing neutral about the countless definitions and typologies that populate the domain of the creative city. The creative city with its creative industry, populated by the creative class in creative incubators – these are terms loaded with policy ambitions. Just like Visscher’s print and Sarphati’s palace, the 3D Print Canal House is a symbol of the interrelation of culture, creativity and economy that is particular to a certain moment in time. In addition, these symbols, as in previous times, are strongly influenced by wishful thinking. We want the previously rather grey bank of the IJ to become a
thriving hub of creativity. But will it? Back in 1611, Visscher and his contemporaries could not have suspected that they were on the brink of what would come to be referred to as the Dutch Golden Age. The builders of the Royal Palace of Amsterdam did not anticipate decay. Sarphati and his peers could not have predicted that their time would herald a separation between art, science and industry. If historical research into the relationship between cities and creativity tells us anything, it is that there are no guarantees and no recipes, and that nothing is fixed from the outset. Creative cities do not develop in a linear way; they do not change in the short term, and they do not operate in isolation.

However, this does not mean we should all sit back and wait for things to take their course. People give shape to the city, oftentimes with grand ideals and good intentions. Who knows, maybe Wim T. Schippers’ grassroots initiative will be successful in returning the Paleis voor Volksvlijt to Frederiksplein? Mayor Eberhard van der Laan is already on board with the idea. And will DUS Architects actually usher in the future of innovative urban planning with the 3D Print Canal House? For now, it serves as a great ‘PR coup’ for the city, as evidenced by the visits by Prime Minister Mark Rutte and US President Barack Obama. What these examples do show is that every urban society – then and now, in the Netherlands and elsewhere in Europe – gives rise to a different kind of creative city. And all these cities deserve tailor-made policies, and should not be forced into some one-size-fits-all mould based on what is supposed to constitute a ‘creative city’.

The author

Claartje Rasterhoff is a historian. She works at the University of Amsterdam as post-doctoral researcher and project coordinator in the programme ‘CREATE: Creative Amsterdam: An E-Humanities Perspective’. 
Further reading


