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Growing Cities

INTEGRATED DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES IN **MEDELLÍN** • URBAN ACUPUNCTURE IN **CARACAS** • REDEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMES IN **RIO DE JANEIRO** • LANDSCAPE INTERVENTIONS IN INFORMAL CITIES OF **LATIN AMERICA** • PERMEABLE CITY **MILAN** • METAMORPHOSIS OF PUBLIC SPACE IN **ROTTERDAM** • CONTEMPORARY PROJECTS OF **ST. PETERSBURG** • DISREGARDED HISTORY: **SEOUL** • TRANSFORMING URBAN LANDSCAPES IN **DHAKA** • URBAN CHALLENGES IN **MUMBAI** • HIGH SPEED, HIGH RISE, HIGH PRICE: **CHINA**



THE CONNECTED CITY

Central Rotterdam's Public Space

Rotterdam's city centre will undergo a true metamorphosis: by strengthening the urban open spaces, the present lack of public realm should improve significantly.



The quality of the living environment is the key issue for prosperous northwest European cities. Having a sustainable, green city is not only an idealistic aspiration, it is an imperative, due to the phenomenon of fragmented urban sprawl. Today's northwest European city, with a reasonably constant population, is now competing with suburban conglomerates for residents and businesses. Quality of life and living is the prerequisite for the 21st century centre city resident.

What distinguishes the city from the newly planned suburban areas is its centuries-old

process of growth and change. The petrified landscape is the backdrop for the plurality of activities and events to which the city is home. The city is no longer held back by the succession of interventions, antagonisms and failures characterising its history, but rather exhibits them as signs of its maturity.

As a result of changing social structures, today's northwest European urban centres are once again in the grip of change. The city centre is a melting pot of subcultures, ages and nationalities, in which the dynamics of the population all come together. The gravitational centre of

the public space has undergone a shift away from the productive space – a space for product sale, market and work environment – to the consumptive space – a space for shopping, entertainment and dwelling. It is characterised by a progressive blurring of the border between work and leisure time, between public and private, between fine and popular culture. If new meaning is to be given to urban public spaces, it is an action of displacing outdated public and private relationships. The task is to achieve diversity in the urban experience that invites continuous reinterpretation. However, any state

of cultural change is only sustainable if it is a part of the logic and history of the site.

New impulses for Rotterdam's city centre

In the context of this discussion, the case of Rotterdam is interesting. Historic patterns were erased and a tabula rasa was created during the reconstruction of the city's heart (incinerated in 1940), which was characterised by the modern urban development approach of functional diversification into different zones. The core of the city centre has shifted westward from its original location.

Reconstruction generated new opportunities and qualities, but the flipside was that the quantity of public space significantly increased during the reconstruction period. The absence of a "sense of place" has been the result, yielding a grey, anonymous public realm. At present, the city centre is primarily used as a space for transport and passage. Particularly in the evening, the streets are quiet – quieter than in comparable cities.

Awareness that Rotterdam's city centre is now lacking in allure is widespread. There is a dawning sense of "now or never". It is truly time to take action to give new life to the city centre.

The key challenge is to create an attractive public space, a task involving more than just cosmetic surgery. The public space must transform the city centre into a public domain. A break with the past has been signified in the fact that now, on the heels of a period during which, just as in the reconstruction phase, the public space was approached in project terms, a comprehensive operation to improve the quality of public space is being set in motion.

Rotterdam's city centre is on the cusp of a new wave of reconstruction, which will bring further concentration of uses and a mix of func-

Opening the city towards its waterways is part of OKRA's transformation strategy for Rotterdam's city centre. Illustration: A new riverfront park along the Maas.

The city centre of Rotterdam in 1700, 1900, 2000 and in the future (from left to right). After the fire of 1940 the centre was built up from scratch. Over the years, the core of the inner city has shifted westward from its original location.



tions. In the coming years, the city centre will be undergoing a true metamorphosis, including the construction of a new train station and surrounding neighbourhoods, the completion of the urban development in the former harbour area Kop van Zuid as well as the densification in the reconstruction areas Lijnbaan Quarter and Laurens Quarter.

Vision: the connected city

To realise the transformation, the landscape architects of the Utrecht-based office OKRA have, in cooperation with Rotterdam's Urban Development and Housing Department, drawn up a framework formulating the key challenges of a vision for the city centre. Just as with other

city centres, the topics include: access for all, the active city, the environmental city and arriving at a destination with a clear identity. "The connected city" is the theme of this vision for the public space, a vision that gives direction to a transformation that will draw on the existing qualities and stories of the city. It will provide for a new spatial organisation for the self-aware 21st century metropolitan resident who, once again, will truly be able to identify with the Rotterdam space: a world characterised by a complex integration of different strata of identity, meaning, activity and experience.

The public space must be a connection between the different focal points in Rotterdam's city centre. Characteristic Rotterdam locations will be given renewed vitality through a

re-invention of the underlying landscape comprised of the river, dikes, older reclamations and routes, such as the rediscovery and reinterpretation of the historical structures that have proved their significance in the course of centuries and which were "forgotten" during the reconstruction period. Old long lines in the city will be upgraded into attractive pedestrian routes connecting areas, such as the station quarter, main shopping district and market. The Coolsingel, which once played a connecting and primary role in the city centre, will once again become a central location between the main shopping district and the original hub of the city centre. Pedestrians will become the centre's dominant source of traffic, supplanting the automobile in that role. This can be achieved by organising the

accessibility of the centre differently: a "park and walk" system at the edge of the centre, linked with attractive pedestrian routes, will ensure that visitors can reach their destinations within five minutes. Parking on the street will be reduced to make space for attractive pedestrian and bicycle routes.

The image of the public realm in the heart of Rotterdam will, as a result of these innovations, improve significantly. The Maas River will be strengthened as an urban attribute through the transformation of its banks into a recreation zone. There are opportunities for creating a green north bank with parks and green quays; the distinctive edge – jagged from the construction of artificial harbours – of the south bank also offers interesting possibilities.

OKRA's vision for the heart of Rotterdam is a "connected city": Public space will connect the different focal points, such as the station quarter (orange), main shopping district (light pink) and market (brown).

CONNECTED CITY, ROTTERDAM, THE NETHERLANDS

Client: City of Rotterdam

Landscape architects: OKRA landscape architects,

dS+V (Urban Development + Housing Department of City of Rotterdam)

Construction: 2009 – 2024

Area: 400 hectares

Costs: 170 million euros (on top of usual investments)

The vision for Rotterdam's city centre includes strengthening the waterways by transforming them into recreation areas (left), and creating a green city by injecting new green spaces and courtyards (centre).

Another goal of OKRA's vision is to connect focal points by downgrading automobile traffic on boulevards and upgrading historical patterns into attractive pedestrian routes, for example the Hoogstraat (right).

The urban water of the Rotte River will be transformed from a forgotten line into a recreational route. The injection of new green spaces and courtyards will change the everyday living environment. It will also lead to greater differentiation in public spaces, such as indoor gardens, roof gardens and vertical gardens. Together with improved visual and functional quality, public space with international allure will make the city centre even more desirable than it is now as a place for dwelling, working and seeking entertainment.

Realisation strategy

The city is serious about these plans. To avoid the fact that plans can stagnate as good intentions on paper, an action plan has been developed by which the municipal government underwrites these ambitions and provides the requisite funds. This will enable a substantial long-term quality improvement programme to get off the ground. Over a period of more than fifteen years an extra 170 million euros will be invested. OKRA has created a city-centre style handbook, a kit for high-quality street furniture and natural stone paving. Within this frame, new interventions will be defined, so that next year, the transformation of the public space in the city centre will actually start becoming visible. These proposals translate the strategy into specific execution plans for the public space, themselves based on mixed programmes for the contemporary city. All of these actions will create a sustainable, vital urban heart of which Rotterdammers will be proud.

