

# International Advisory Board Rotterdam

## Working group Grassroots



### Participants:

Arttenders, R'damse Nieuwe, Siobhan Burger, Arttenders, Rotterdamse Nieuwe  
De Correspondent, Malique Mohamud  
WORM, Jan Hiddink  
DJ & founder of Boogie Friday, Damoon Foroutanian,  
Vers Beton ("Fresh Concrete"), Hilde Westerink  
Roots & Routes, Jade Schiff  
HipHopHuis, Aruna Vermeulen

# Session 1

On 16 November 2016, the first meeting (of two in total) of the 'Grassroots' work group took place in the framework of the IABx Culture. The Rotterdam Municipal Executive asked this international board of experts to deliver an opinion in the autumn of 2017 on the cultural sector in Rotterdam. Various work groups from the cultural sector are now working on this.

The key question is: How can Rotterdam be put on the map as a national and international cultural hotspot more effectively?

Aruna kicked off the meeting. The aim of the meeting was to answer a number of sub-questions that were presented by the IABx. The method used was as follows: two subgroups discussed the questions, after which the entire group reconvened to discuss the answers. Below, you can see a few comments and conclusions from work session

## DEPARTURE POINTS

- To the participants, 'Grassroots' does not mean 'small' or 'local', it should be seen rather as a formula: how to organise yourself.
- The participants do not feel affinity with the stated objective of putting Rotterdam on the map as a 'hotspot'; instead they want to show what Rotterdam has to offer; tell an inclusive story. That is not happening at present.
- The participants want to highlight which vision they use with respect to culture in Rotterdam and the sector and how this vision matches, or differs from, that of the IABx experts. Sharing stories and conducting a dialogue are central to this.

## GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

### Observation 1: The key question of the IABx is too 'jubilant'

The work group is of the opinion that the key question is based too much on the 'marketisation' of culture: how can we make even more money with culture? The participants note that 'big' is attractive, but 'small' makes special. Without local liveliness, there is nothing much to offer at an international level. The branding of the city (the narrative, the story) should be about that. Emphasising authentic impressions that make Rotterdam extra special.

### Observation 2: The story of the city of Rotterdam is vague. What do we communicate?

The culture of Rotterdam is hard to 'market, as Rotterdam as a city has a diffuse image: it is hard for

outsiders to assess what Rotterdam really is about. This is a question of perception. Does Rotterdam have an image problem? The story that is currently being told does not describe the city's identity. The current story is about Rotterdam as a 'city of reconstruction', as a 'port city' and an 'architectural city'. However, more than anything else, the city's identity can be described as young, multicultural and diverse.

Large groups are not included in this story. Which Rotterdam are we talking about? And which Rotterdam do we want to project?

### **Observation 3: The Rotterdam cultural sector has been organised 'top-down'**

Policy-makers never fail to emphasise the cosmopolitan character of the city, in a top-down story; as a given that tends towards conservation and control. The 'Grassroots' work group that was formed (as a representative) therefore has a political dimension: it developed in the periphery of the city, outside the systems. That means that we do not have to relate to institutions or established orders. This ensures that we retain our uniqueness. 'Quality' is therefore not directly related to 'high' or 'low' culture. A large part of the city does not connect to the established order or the infrastructure of the city. The group finds that there is an increasing chasm in society. The perception is that the current institutions do not provide the answers to the questions raised by this polarisation, with a growing aversion to the status quo as a result. The (continued) top-down interpretation of 'the' Rotterdam cultural sector (including thinking in terms of institutions and systems) ignores what is developing and happening at a micro level.

### **Observation 4: Unleashing talent to provide meaning to the city's identity**

Rotterdam is a young and ethnically diverse city. How can we unleash that part of the city that is currently not being heard? Freeing up capital is about making visible the talent that exists among various target groups in the city. And about participation; everyone should (be able to) take part. The capital that is available must be used as a major element to give meaning to the identity of Rotterdam. How can cultural talent flow with time? This calls for a different distribution of power, with which space is created for talents and other target groups. How can we facilitate that dynamic, on which Grassroots has an impact, as effectively as possible, and integrate it into the identity of Rotterdam?

## **CONCLUSIONS**

### **Conclusion 1: A revised key question for IABx**

The identity and image of the city do not match. The city centre is now heralded (inter)nationally as the unique selling point, but the city has a wider perspective and multiple layers. This entails a certain dynamic that must be integrated into the city's identity. Rotterdam as some sort of permanent laboratory, which is always in a state of 'flux'. Key question revised by the Grassroots work group: "How can we better align the Rotterdam identity and the image of Rotterdam for the purposes of city branding?"

## Conclusion 2: Tell an inclusive story (= identity)

The story of the city is vague. The city belongs to all layers, in which everyone is equal in principle. Do you do justice to a changing world, which Rotterdam in particular is iconic for, with the present story? Is the world, the living environment, of the city that is so diverse put in the limelight most accurately? The work group concludes that this is currently not the case, and wishes to tell an inclusive story, in which target groups are incorporated that are currently left out, but which do matter and determine the identity of your city.

## Conclusion 3: The cultural sector must renew itself

In order to tell an inclusive story, and to show the diversity of your city, as a cultural sector you must have the courage to ask difficult questions.. As a sector, you must be aware of your blind spots. And in addition to this, you must be organised in such a way that as a sector you pursue inclusiveness and consequently also demonstrate it. Internal barriers must be eliminated. This calls for a different distribution of power. Consequently, participation also requires a willingness to share power and to relinquish control. Only then will you be able to show, recognise and embrace whatever develops in the compost layer of your city and the added value that brings.

## Conclusion 4: Prerequisites for change

To engage in a dialogue with various pertinent groups in the city, one condition must first be met: the acceptance and acknowledgement of the differences in the city. The Grassroots work group wishes to put its hands up and facilitate those target groups in the city that are not part of the image of the city (yet). Permanence in this respect may be achieved by stimulating those target groups financially, in order to respond to questions from their day-to-day experience. Subcultures must be facilitated in their powers and abilities to regulate themselves. This does not mean handing out money to new organisations to create programmes for new target groups in order to create demand.

## FOLLOW-UP

- Find and share good case studies (London, Berlin, Paris and Miami)
- PR and story-telling by Grassroots
- Use 'anger' as pro-activity
- Decolonization of the dominant school of thought
- Innovation hub for culture
- Alternative listings for entertainment and time out
- Cross media

## Session 2

On 8 December 2016, the second meeting of the 'Grassroots' work group took place in the framework of the IABx Culture. Wim Pijbes was asked to explore the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats for Rotterdam as a city of culture and tourist destination. On 30 November 2016 he presented this at the official kick-off of the IABx in the Groothandelsgebouw. In the second session, the Grassroots work group reflected on the exploration by Mr Pijbes.

The work group session was attended by:

- Siobhan Burger, Arttenders, Rotterdamse Nieuwe
- Malique Mohamud, De Correspondent
- Jan Hiddink, WORM
- Damoon Foroutanian, DJ & founder of Boogie Friday
- Hilde Westerink, Vers Beton ("Fresh Concrete")
- Vinod Singh, Bird, Me We
- Khalil Ryahi, Atlas Festival, Triphouse
- Aruna Vermeulen, HipHopHuis

Being the chair, Aruna kicked off the meeting. The aim of this meeting was to reflect on the exploration carried out by Wim Pijbes. Do the participants recognise part of their own vision in his findings? The discussion was held in a plenary meeting.

## DEPARTURE POINTS

- The participants experienced the results of the exploration by Wim Pijbes as hierarchical, conservative and non-inclusive.
- The participants wish to show what was not included in the story about the city.
- How can they make a statement in their own way, which also appeals to the IABx experts?

## GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

### Observation 1: The exploration of Mr Pijbes is aimed at volume and greatness

The story told by Mr Pijbes is about the icons of the city. Cultural blockbusters that are likely to be hits internationally. This is in spite of the fact that the municipal budget for culture is still a long way from the desired level. The participants of the Grassroots work group do not see any direct starting points in it for the target groups they represent. Hooking up with the programming of the icons of the city is an option, but they would be selling themselves short in doing so. As Mr Pijbes also noted, the participants see that the city's policy-makers have blind spots: there is no consistent policy and certain aspects are overlooked. The city's image is now seen from an international perspective. A

perspective aimed at volume and greatness. A sizeable part of Rotterdam, which makes the city, consequently falls out of view. What the participants are missing in the Pijbes story is people. For example, Rotterdam is a port city and it is exactly that element that has an impact on the cultural composition of the city. There is more to culture than what Pijbes describes.

## Observation 2: The story of the city is not inclusive and is dominated by marketing

The story of the city appears to be dominated by marketing policy-makers; they decide which stories are told. The city's different commercial one-liners create a discrepancy between identity and image. This leads to an artificial and fleeting, superficial image in which the participants do not recognise themselves. It does not reflect the various experiences and environments in the city.

Rotterdam does not have to reinvent itself over and over again, for this leads to a diffuse image. Instead, it should develop a more long-term vision. Multiplicity needs to be recognised with this, and inclusiveness must be embraced with it. In Mr Pijbes's world, his exploration – his vision of the city – is legitimate, but he forgets that there are other worlds with other aspects. The cultural sector seems to be inside a bubble. It is everyone for himself.

## Observation 3: Do we need another measurement tool?

In this exploration, Mr Pijbes 'measures' the international success by opinions expressed in the press. The participants note that this concerns the old press of yesteryear. We are dealing with a new era, dominated by new forms of media, with an unmistakable influence on various (young) target groups in the city. There are new movers and shakers, so-called 'influencers', and various news stories. Social media provide them with a platform. Rotterdam should invest in those Rotterdam-based talents who can put the city on the map internationally.

## CONCLUSIONS

### Conclusion 1: Provide continuity in the story of your city: what is your agenda?

The participants conclude that Rotterdam does not have to reinvent itself again and again, but it must develop a long-term vision about the image of the city that is an expression of its (true) identity. A long-term strategy for the next 20 years at least. It is recommended to activate the city's brand with recurring themes (following the example set by Miami). In addition to this, this is also functional because it is newsworthy. Link all your marketing campaigns to those themes to be successful with your strategy. Rotterdam is capricious in nature, moving in waves; the city is 'dead' and then brimming with life again. There are changing needs and different generations. We need to create some continuity in this capriciousness. In this way, you will facilitate various needs and stories in the city. By working with themes, you can concentrate different initiatives, events or launches in a certain period, allowing all the players sufficient attention and opportunities to share their stories. The city should provide more continuity to the diversity of faces that make up the city instead of communicating something different each year.

## Conclusion 2: Make new combinations and join forces

With these themes in mind, one can also co-operate well and join forces. For example, the CHIO (the annual International Show Jumping Championships) could be linked with Rotterdam artists. In that way, you give a new and innovative boost to the city which is more inclusive: harness power sources and make new combinations. However, this means: being able and willing to spot new opportunities. The prerequisite is that the city is geared towards that: in its policies, infrastructure and marketing but also in mentality. By joining forces, you increase your reach. And in doing so, you are acting in the long term. The participants point at the methods used by start-ups. You can see that established companies increasingly work together with small innovative parties, also with a view to achieving an authentic story. Bundling themes also provides the 'new order' with opportunities to link up with the established order. The city's agenda is inscrutable to many people, or is delineated too rigidly. Synchronising the agendas requires continuous communication. If you wish to develop new relations, you need to know what the focus is on and what the agenda is.

## FOLLOW-UP

- Make the Grassroots makers and creators visible to the IABx experts.
- Case studies are needed to illustrate the new way of thinking. To look at city branding in a different light. Show new examples that are not necessarily better or more successful, but which are different and therefore inspiring.
- The Grassroots work group asks Rotterdam Partners the following question: how do you deal with the changing world, knowing that all sorts of things are happening in the city that matter internationally, but happen on a scale that is only one 10th of what is going on at Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen for example?
- Develop a new measurement tool which reflects the impact For example, introduce new persona
- Organise an alternative meeting of directors.
- The participants of the Grassroots work group are invited to an expert session chaired by Siobhan Burger for IABx on 7 February and 7 March. After that period, the work group will create a spoken word video message for the IABx experts under the supervision of Malique Mohamud.

[BLOG AT WORDPRESS.COM.](https://iabrotterdam.wordpress.com/grassroots/)