

Amateur Cities

Connecting city thinkers
to city makers.

December 18th, 2017

Dear Mayor Aboutaleb,

When we moved to Rotterdam 11 years ago, we could not have imagined that we would stay here for such a long time. Arriving as young students, we assumed we would move on as soon as our studies would be over, and eventually we developed our professional careers and private lives right here. Rotterdam is hard to love at first sight, but at the same time it's a fascinating and gratifying city to live in on the long term.

Rotterdam has changed a lot in the last years, and urban development projects and architecture have been at the core of the city's transformation. This did not go unnoticed. In 2016, Lonely Planet placed Rotterdam in the top ten cities to visit, mentioning "This metropolitan jewel of the Netherlands is riding a wave of urban development, redevelopment and regeneration." It seems that the city's efforts are paying off. Or don't they?

It seems to us that Rotterdam is falling into the same trap that many cities already have: focusing too much on appealing to tourists and investors and forgetting the people that already live here. Touristification and gentrification are already backfiring in many European cities and neighboring Amsterdam offers a good case in point. We would really like to urge you to learn from these cities and not repeat their mistakes.

The housing market in Rotterdam is rapidly getting out of hand. Both rental and selling prices are going up everyday, making it impossible for young people to stay in the city. Be it students unable to find affordable rooms, young families unable to buy a house, or working people with lower incomes unable to access the constantly shrinking stock of social housing. There is also a significant amount of self-employed professionals in the creative sector, that managed to survive the crisis and contribute to the current, innovative profile of the city. Their survival and possibility to develop creative work however heavily depend on the affordable housing and working spaces which are rapidly disappearing.

In short, Rotterdam is still vibrant and attractive because it still offers a lot of space to its inhabitants to develop and grow. Not losing this egalitarian space is of utmost importance. This is also directly connected to one of the strongest advantages of this city: its diversity and multiculturality. Not only it stems from Rotterdam's particular history but it still is a huge asset in the city and definitely one of the reasons we love living here. But to maintain and even increase this diversity, the city needs to provide the space for people from various walks of life to inhabit it. Rotterdam only has to gain by giving space to people from various ethnic backgrounds, people of all ages and with varying incomes. But all these people need somewhere to live too!

There are several ways to provide housing conditions that maintain a healthy population mix and prevent the violent gentrification of the city. Social housing percentages should be protected or even enhanced. Existing social housing should not be demolished and replaced by new one pushed to the fringes of the city, but be integrated in all new developments. New developments should cover a range of sizes, prices and configurations in order to accommodate people with differing needs. Regulations such as the income cap are discriminatory, why not replace them with rent regulation and proper controls to check whether rental laws are applied as they should?

If Rotterdam is to be truly resilient and prepared for a future where human migration will only intensify, it has to make everyone, and not only a white upper middle class, feel welcome and at home. The history of the city, already provides an advantage compared to other Dutch cities and Rotterdam should grow together with its current and future inhabitants. The success of the city should be the natural consequence of the prosperity of its citizens.

Sincerely,
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