

Urban Meeting 4

Safe Cities

November 13, 2008

The fourth Urban Meeting held in Rotterdam as part of the six-lecture series to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Institute for Housing and Urban Development Studies focused on ways of keeping fast-growing cities safe. The speakers for the evening, representatives from Toronto and Rotterdam, opened the meeting by reminding the audience that expanding cities contain the densest concentrations of people from different backgrounds, and as the income gap widens, so concerns about safety issues become more pressing.

Lydia Fitchko (director, Social Policy, Analysis and Research, City of Toronto) and Denise Campbell (manager, Community Development, City of Toronto) suggested that their job functions should be integrated. Toronto's mottos, 'Making a safe city safer' and 'Diversity is our strength' are reflected in the fact that the city is one of the world's safest (15th in the Mercer 'Quality of Living in Global Cities' ranking). Yet the majority of Canada's violent crime occurs in Toronto, a fact that is partly attributed to the proximity to the border with the USA, and associated firearms smuggling. Since 2002 there has been an increase in gun crime and gang violence in Toronto. 'Gangs are experienced as a family. It's hard to get someone out of a gang,' said Fitchko. More than half of the residents of Toronto were born abroad, originating from a range of 208 countries. In the Greater Toronto Region 140 different neighbourhoods are recognized, 13 of which are considered vulnerable. Campbell presented an overview of several youth gang prevention programmes in operation in the city. 'By encouraging investment in individual districts and by setting up action teams, community capacity takes responsibility from a local level,' she explained. Young people are encouraged to participate in employment and education programmes. Campbell elaborated, saying, 'We want to bring back trust in institutions by creating opportunities.' Fitchko added, 'When you see that your older brother can't find a job after graduating from university, it's hard to stimulate yourself to study.'

Seeming to take the opposite view to Toronto's systematic and slightly bureaucratic approach, Arjen Littooi (director, Safety Issues, Rotterdam) gave a brief summary of the more direct Rotterdam approach. 'Ten years ago,' he said, 'the safety situation in Rotterdam was pretty poor. The dissatisfaction of inhabitants was made clear when a right wing party won the elections in this traditionally left wing, workers' city. Although there were no gangs to speak of, there were problems with littered streets, drugs and shoplifting. The Rotterdam approach can be summarized as "not words but deeds". We stopped drafting plans. We made action programmes.' When the moderator Felix Rottenberg asked about weaker elements in the Rotterdam approach, Littooi answered, 'No single approach is given priority.' His suggestion that public space should be made a priority focus was the apt connection to the next speaker, Kristian Koreman (founder of ZUS, a Rotterdam-based design firm).

Koreman commented, 'The feeling of safety and wellbeing is influenced by many factors. Creating an attractive public environment is a more intelligent way of making a city safer.' Koreman presented an illustrated list of nine means of improving public space:

- 1) Safety is about aesthetics (crowd control gates create an unsafe feeling);
- 2) Think about eye-level impact, not skylines;
- 3) Think in terms of temporary use;
- 4) Mix programmes;
- 5) Be more tolerant of entrepreneurs (less strict rules on pavements would encourage co-responsibility for the street);
- 6) Invest in public space (this also adds real estate value);
- 7) Make connections between public spaces;
- 8) Accept unexpected use;
- 9) Risk experiment.

Photos: Rein van der Zee

