

paper Patricia van Ulzen, Erasmus University Rotterdam, September 2004
'Rotterdam between 1970 and 2001'

Two and a half years ago, when I started my Ph.D. research on Rotterdam between 1970 and 2001, my project was still entitled 'Rotterdam, City of Culture'. The main aim of the first research plan I wrote was to describe and to explain Rotterdam's cultural growth between 1970 and 2001, ending with the well-deserved nomination in 2001 of Cultural Capital of Europe. All too soon though, I saw a huge pitfall on the path I was about to turn into, a pitfall, I found out, many other authors had gotten into before me. This pitfall is a combination of enumeration and apologia. I will explain this. How do you convince your readers that the development within thirty years of cultural life in the city you write about is impressive? By mentioning the quantity and praising the quality of the city's cultural events and institutions at the end of the period, compared to the beginning of the period. In other words, by enumerating and advocating. I did not look forward to doing this, and I did not expect my readers to stay awake while reading this. But what is worse: my plea would not stand firm. Because Rotterdam would still look like a cultural dwarf compared to London or New York, or even to Amsterdam. Well-disposed readers would maybe applaud for Rotterdam's achievements, but in the eyes of others the city would look somewhat pathetic. And in the meantime I would have exchanged my position as a scholar for a city-marketing job .

As I said before, I found out that this pitfall has made victims and in fact looking back at my earlier publications I must confess I was one of them. But instead of digging up my own false steps, and spoiling my day, I would rather point out others' now. And I would like to single out somewhat paradoxically a text that inspired me very much, Harvey Molotch' 1996 article on L.A. as Design Product. I read this text in a very early stage of my research. His subject matter, 'L.A.'s transformation [...] "from a provincial backwater to an artmaking capital equal to New York" ' (p. 235), is in many ways similar to the transformation of Rotterdam I was enquiring. Molotch's article opened my eyes for the power of the image of a place, I quote again: 'The image of places comes from the sense people have - local people and those far away - of the cultural-material interactions within them. And this reputation of place becomes another aspect of local economic structure, a part of its geographic capital.' (p. 228-229) Unquote. But at the same time this article made me

aware of the abovementioned pitfall. After the first brilliant 19 pages, the article gets more and more advocative and enumerative, unflaggingly pushing forward L.A.'s achievements in the field of clothing, residences, furniture, and automobiles.

So for me this article was inspiring as well as instructive. The inspiration I took from it, was that instead of trying to sum up all the Rotterdam cultural achievements between 1970 and 2001, I decided I had to compare Rotterdam's dominant image in 1970 with the city's image in 2001. And the instruction I took from it, was that I would not try to correct this image, but instead try to connect the image with the things that happened in the city. At the time, though, I had no idea how I could make this connection between the world of images, myths, and clichés on the one hand, and the real world of events, buildings and people on the other hand.

Peter Borsay's book about The Image of Georgian Bath handed me a method to make this connection. Borsay recounts in his introduction how he had tried to get to the very bottom of Bath's history and had to conclude that there was no such bottom. Even the oldest, seemingly factual documents about the city were contaminated, as it were, by visions on the city. His conclusion was, I quote: 'The logic of this line of argument suggested that sources were not (more or less) transparent windows on a real world, but *images*, and that if there was any reality to be discovered, it was in these images themselves rather than in what purportedly lay behind them. It seemed to follow from this that the proper study of Georgian Bath should focus on representation rather than reality, and that the sources should be treated as objects in their own right, possessing an internal logic and form, and capable not only of reflecting but also of structuring perception.' (p. 5) End of quotation. In spite of this radical argumentation, the author does not give up on 'real history'. Instead, he assumes an interaction between the so-called real history, and the image of the place he investigates. I quote: 'At the deepest level the imagined and the real, the cultural and the material are in perpetual interaction, part of a seamless process in which neither the substructure nor the superstructure exert primacy.' (p. 253) Though Rotterdam is in many ways the exact opposite of Georgian Bath, both cities have strong images. I decided I would use the method Peter Borsay had demonstrated, and try to describe the interaction between image and real history in Rotterdam between 1970 and 2001.

The image of Rotterdam in 1970 was expressed sharply in the texts and images that announced the big exhibition that was organised by the local government in the city center in 1970. This exhibition was called Communication '70, abbreviated

as C70. The central issue of the exhibition was the bad image of Rotterdam's city center. Rotterdam's center was devastated during the Second World War, and rebuilt in a radical modernist fashion. Whereas in the first twenty years after the war nothing but eulogies were heard about this amazingly fast and state-of-the-art resurrection of the city, from the middle of the sixties on people started to complain that the center was not pleasant, not comfortable, not cosy. The modernist architecture and town planning were to blame, thus read the general opinion. The streets were too straight and too wide, there was too much open space, the buildings were too cold, too big and too prosaic. So the exhibition C70 responded to this image-problem by making every effort to make Rotterdam look smaller. Little temporary buildings were set up everywhere in the center, to house cosy little cafés and nice little boutiques. From the Central Station a domed walking route was built, which was meant to give people a feeling of shelter. Walking under the domes, one could neglect the detested open space and big buildings (illustration). Even the port, Rotterdam's pride ever since the nineteenth century, and by 1970 the largest in the world, was accused of being too big and polluting the environment.

Looking back, Rotterdam in 1970 showed all symptoms of an identity crisis. Rotterdam used to be proud of its bigness, of its international port, of its radical, prosaic mentality. Now the city expressed a longing to be small and comfy, and instead of pride showed embarrassment about the port. When we look at Rotterdam's dominant image in 2001, we see that this crisis is evidently over. Let's have a look at the touristic map of Rotterdam, edition 2001, that is published under supervision of the municipality. (illustration) On this map of the city center important buildings and touristic attractions are indicated by perspectival drawings. The map is enclosed by photographs and texts which underline specific aspects of Rotterdam. What is striking about this map is firstly the emphasis on high-rise and modern architecture. The hyper-modern buildings on the South Bank of the Maas are drawn larger than the buildings in the north. In the photographs surrounding the map, modern high-rise architecture is also emphasised. The river Maas, with various impressive ships, is also a prominent feature of the map, and so are the bridges over the river. By indicating Rotterdam's modest 'Chinatown' with drawing of a dragon on the West-Kruiskade, the image of a big city is completed.

This image of the city is largely reflected in a type of publicity that is as powerful as it is uncontrollable: tv-commercials. Since Jackie Chan discovered

Rotterdam's cinematographic qualities in his 1998 movie Who am I? (illustration)
Rotterdam is very popular as a setting for commercials which try to promote a product as up-to-date, dynamic, young, vibrant, hip. The modernity and openness of Rotterdam's town planning is utilised in these commercials, and the material objects that symbolize this modernity and openness are the modern buildings, the broad and straight streets, the wide river, and the two large bridges. Heineken for instance shot a commercial in Rotterdam to upgrade the reputation of their beer. In the movie clip we see the grandness of Rotterdam, its skyhigh, internationally renowned architecture, the wide river, the imposing bridge. (movieclip)

It is obvious that the same characteristics of Rotterdam that were detested in 1970, are celebrated in 2001. How can we explain this transformation of Rotterdam's image? In general, authors point out the altered architectural appearance of the city since the late 1980s, when one high-rise building after the other climbed up to the Rotterdam sky, and municipal efforts for the revitalisation of the city. These circumstances, however, were preceded by a change of attitude, by the birth of a mentality which approved of a big city with big, prosaic buildings and a big city life. As is described before in urban literature, the most famous example being Sharon Zukin's Loft Living, artists and cultural entrepreneurs were the first to develop another vision on the city. While the local authorities were still fighting the open, wide and prosaic character of Rotterdam, artists by the end of the 1970s already appreciated the city precisely because of these characteristics. The open character was associated with open minded-ness, and the supposedly prosaic mentality attracted artists who were tired of the soft hippie-era that came to an end. Rem Koolhaas, our international star-architect, was one of them. He opened his office in Rotterdam in 1978. For him, that other big city of the Netherlands, Amsterdam, was no option. He found it too claustrophobic. At the same time, a group of artists settled on an abandoned drinking-water supply terrain by the river, and started firms like a publishing house for books on architecture and design. They also initiated concerts on a pontoon that took the musicians and their audience for a trip through the harbours. The gap between Rotterdam as a port city and Rotterdam as a city of culture, a gap that is always seen as a huge problem by local politicians, was bridged by them by making the port an integral part of the art work. The Rotterdam performer and poet Jules Deelder, whose unofficial title is the Night-Mayor of Rotterdam, already in 1984 published a book of poetry in which he celebrated Rotterdam's openness and

pragmatism, and ridiculed the efforts to make Rotterdam look cosy and comfy. Although this was not their conscious intention, these and many other artists and entrepreneurs made a link with Rotterdam's cultural life of the 1920s and 1930s. In those years too the harbour and other Rotterdam technological achievements were immensely popular in artistic circles as well as amongst plain Rotterdam people. This is illustrated for example by the reception of Rotterdam's illustrious railway bridge in the heart of the city, best known by its pet name 'De Hef'. While the popular press reported in great detail about the construction and the bringing into use of the new bridge from 1925 to 1927, the Hef-bridge was also the subject of artistic experiments, like Joris Ivens' almost abstract, world-famous film The Bridge (De Brug, 1928, illustration).

Now let's go back to the 1980s. Rotterdam was lucky enough to have a local government that sensed the change of mentality in the city. In 1987 they published two reports about the new Rotterdam, one of them was literally entitled 'The New Rotterdam' the other one 'The Renewal of Rotterdam'. (illustration cover Nieuw Rotterdam) The Renewal of Rotterdam, which was written by an independent commission that advised the government, contains the best Fingerspitzengefühl. The authors speak of a turning point for the city, that needs a proper adjustment by the local governors. Complaints about Rotterdam's city center being too modern or too big are nowhere in the text to be found, on the contrary, I quote: 'The city center is unique. As the only city in the Netherlands, Rotterdam has the image of a city with an internationally looking, modern appearance. This character can still be considerably amplified, for example by more density and by high-rise buildings.' The cover of the other report, 'The New Rotterdam' is like an illustration accompanying these words. The interesting thing is that this dream image of a Rotterdam with high-rise buildings is also rooted in the 1920s and 1930, as this illustration (GRoot Rotterdam, photograph of Chicago) clearly shows.

Indeed this is the direction that Rotterdam took. (illustration: present-day postcards) I would like to underline that I do not refer to an exclusive architectural change of direction. More generally, since the mid 1980s the city has accepted that it is a big, hard working, port city, not beautiful in the traditional Dutch sense, but with an international, metropolitan appearance. This appearance generated a cultural life that is incomparable to that of the Netherlands' first Dutch city of culture Amsterdam, in quantity, but also in quality, because it shows some typically Rotterdam features: a

thriving youth culture with branches like graffiti, dance, and the like, a clustering of internationally reputed architectural firms, and many artists who deliberately operate in Rotterdam because of the commonsensical cultural climate.

I would like to conclude my speech by evaluating my approach. I think that by turning my attention to the image of Rotterdam, instead of to the chronology of events solely, I uncovered events and persons that are crucial for the city's development, but that otherwise would have escaped my attention. It seems to be that by concentrating on the history of images, one gets in closer contact with the history of the real world.