Reconstructing the city

Key words:
Rotterdam, inner city, reconstruction, Laurens quarter, dilemmas, scenarios, planning, design. ...complexity and more:

In 1995 the city of Rotterdam made a brave attempt to tackle the matter of complexity in city planning. People involved like urban planners, architects, designers, politicians spent the year 1995 both to celebrate the 50 year of reconstruction (the city centre being completely destroyed in WW II) as well as looking ahead without the burden of political and time restrictions. To me it seems helpful to give a short overview of the method, process and some results of this scenario exercise. My invitation hereby is to rethink and criticise this method in the light of actual complexity in matters concerning urban life and city planning. There seems to be a revival of scenario thinking these days due to growing uncertainty, complexity and lack of competence in public governance, i.e. a coordinated and integral way to tackle the challenges the city has to deal with. The city as a long lasting, steadily growing and changing phenomenon deserves better.
The 1995 ‘what if?’ question: reflections on the Laurens quarter Rotterdam

Intro

In this essay I like to reflect on the skills and abilities of the so called ‘city makers’ to construct possible futures, to debate on them and to apply results in their work, either as input for plans and designs or as a test for durability of those. Not the desirability is the key question but the thinkable.

“At a time the reconstruction of the post war city of Rotterdam is nearly completed around the year 1995 and the city becomes more and more part of a greater and more complex urban reality, what are the next objectives for city planners and administrators?”. 

The so called ‘Reconstruction plan’ from 1946 became obsolete. The city began to bite its own tail, being nearly completed. What are the next sources of inspiration, the next challenges for transformation and modus operandi for planners? Is it possible to learn from the future? Or are we tied to the ‘science of muddling through’, ‘fuzzy logic’ or work under the ‘delusions of the day’?

I will try to illustrate this on the case1 of the Laurens quarter as prototypical for the whole central area of the city as well for the current planning attitude of land use and building plots. The main sources for this essay are two documents:

- “Wanderings through the landscape of the future (two volumes describing the process)”
- “Magazine: visions on the future of the city, harbour and region (final and concluding report)”

1 The other cases were: Schiehaven as new residential waterfront, urban renewal area on the south bank, large scale landscape of Middle IJselmonde as extension of the city, the A4 corridor as logistic lifeline, a large scale landfill in the sea for the mainport.
These contain the justification and report on results of the complete scenario manifestation process: dilemmas, possibilities for solution, scenarios, resulting briefs, imaginations by design and public debate on all these elements of the process.

About scenarios

An inspiring start and tipping point for us was the introduction of the knowledge of the scenario unit of Shell, represented by Jaap Leemhuis †. The first question was why and how, followed by ‘warnings’ how to avoid often made misunderstandings in misuse of scenarios as being a matter of choice. But above all we tried to consider the city a phenomenon requiring long-term thinking focused on possibilities for timely correction. Just like a global business like Shell or like the course management of a super tanker. And finally, no more fun for urbanists than talking and designing the future of the city, especially under the limitations or better the challenges of uncertainty: i.e. not being in charge as used to be and nevertheless trying to ‘design’ the city.

Exploring, grasping, researching the future is done in different ways over time. Ideologies, extrapolations, utopias, trend watching, futurism, fore casting, back casting, scenarios. All with different grades of certainty, conviction, acting consequences. If there is no grip on the future there should rest the condition of chaos. In fact this scenario is the one to be avoided. The city as network develops itself with a poor pragmatism for planners, designers and policymakers as result. ‘Anything goes’.

50 years reconstruction/50 years future

Around 1995 we tested in Rotterdam our position in the tradition of city planning and future research. We saw this period as breaking point between a typical Rotterdam based attitude of building, rebuilding, spatial planning, plan regulations and the upcoming
feeling of uncertainty and lacking grip on urban developments and dynamics and how to respond on these.

Quote 1995:
“We (i.e. the city in charge) found ourselves on a turning point with maybe great psychological consequences. How to preserve the charm and effectiveness of the reconstruction moral now the city is facing (physical) completion, clear new goals are absent, consensus on strategy is weak and there is no ethical framework in which urban society in all its diversity can flourish. Now there is a transition from growth and physical planning to maintain and cooperate. This seems to be a less glamorous foreland full of doubts. How to stay enthusiastic? How to keep the ‘Rotterdam’ spirit alive? How to ‘organise’ new inspiration for city makers and-designers?”

In essence it is all about dealing with a fruitful paradox. On the one hand a confusion of the planning- and building soul (missing the building plots, the omni presence of construction cranes, the sound of the ram piles, the shock of the new). On the other hand the longing for of a new inspiring ‘design’ paradigm and the tools and skills to deal with an urban challenge full of uncertainty and complexity. How to play this new game?

First step: get rid of the usual limitations and drawbacks. Extend your horizon beyond the well know. Eliminate the objections as we are already familiar with. Stimulate an open and creative process of what is thinkable and possible. Ask the question ‘what if’?

Second step: start with the formulation of dilemmas\(^2\). In order to make the integral set of urban problems open to discussion, we formulated a quintet of dilemmas concerning the urban reality with their matching questions.

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\(^2\) This was done on the basis of interviews with qualified referents and their opponents in order to formulate the dilemmas as apparently conflicting.
Social dilemma:

Apparently, there has come an end to the absorbing capacities of the city while the influx of migrants is still going on even in a faster pace. How will the segmentation of society develop in separated domains? What is the minimal outline and cohesion of different urban communities to give them space for their own and hold them all together as well?

Economic dilemma:

Growth of the urban economy stagnates. Yet international competition requires further capital intensive development of the main port. On the other hand, a great lack of jobs for low educated people. Where to find new employment? Should the urge for international competitiveness be without hesitation?

Ecologic dilemma:

Is ecological justified growth possible? How to solve the deadlock between the great infrastructural interventions needed as a main port city and the ecological pressure on the quality of the living environment? How to balance those two requirements in a dynamic way?

Political, administrative dilemma:

What are the consequences of the opposing sources of powers for city politics: internationalisation on the one hand and decentralisation on the other. What are the points of application for more cooperation between people and business involved while (local) authorities step back? What’s the playing field for city authorities (compared to the regional ones) while urban networks vary by influence and effects?

Hardware dilemma:

How to ‘plan’ for the long term while on the short run urban dynamics, social phenomena are volatile even more by lacking a dominant set of standards and values? Is there an overall key role reserved for the planning and designing pro’s in this era of
the ‘undecided’? Or is ‘aesthetics’ and ‘technics’ all that remains?

Formulated in this sense the first three dilemmas concern the powers that surround us and influence the conditions for the city to prosper or not. The fourth dilemma is about how city government and administration react on these. The last one is about the resulting planning, shaping and designing the physical environment.

By selecting 7 prototypical locations in the city, the region and the harbour we operationalized previous method in order to investigate and imagine the consequences. The so-called Laurens quarter was one of them. In fact, it stands for the destroyed and rebuild city centre of Rotterdam.

Input where not dilemmas but two incorporated scenarios. They form the framework, the narrative for two opposite sets of assumptions³.

... suppose Rotterdam will continue to develop according to the speed and the requirements of the free market... how could the selected location perform and look like?

...suppose Rotterdam there will be a hitch somewhere, sometime which will give the opportunity to rethink routines, practices, current values...what will be the challenges then, the new briefs?

This looks like a choice between full blown modernisation and temporize the run into the future.

³We choose 2 instead of 4 for the sake of contrast and to challenge the ‘designers’. 
Formulated at that time. Quote:

**Rotterdam a tempo (the Maas still in charge):**

“This future is a result of an undamaged belief in freedom of acting. This (neo)liberal modal stands for unfolding and emancipation of human skills. Rotterdam is thereby marked for growth. Policies, behaviour and goals are strongly determined by the strive for maximisation of productivity, profitability and effectiveness”.

**Rotterdam no-hurry (the Maas under control):**

“This urban society is marked by a correction on the great tensions and dilemmas as given before. Politics saw the destructive oppositions in society and took the consequences for that. Between capital, labour and nature. Between entrepreneurial maximisation and natural assets. Between prosperity and exclusion. The spirit is the one of optimisation over maximisation”.

This was the line of thoughts\(^4\) in 1995. And the two scenarios in a nutshell. Looking back from 2016 both scenario ‘tempo’ and ‘no-hurry’ took place. On the one hand, further globalisation and ICT fuelled developments invaded the urban societies. Disruptive innovations shake the vested interests. The city growths, pulls success and pushes failure.

On the other hand, the 2008 crisis that followed (and still continues?) promised or better suggested a tipping point for doing things different. A shock but no awe? At least we see a different, scattered and very divers pattern of bottom up initiatives instead of top down attempts to stay in control by central governments. The last decades look more like ‘in between’. A mix of the two scenarios on different fields and different levels.

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\(^4\) thoughts based on a foundation of systematic and specialistic knowledge and interviews with key players in the specific fields of interests.
Two Rotterdam time spirits opposed (1995 – 2016)

- Instead of evaluating the targets for buildings (m2 of offices, houses, high rises etc.) in order to prove success, attention shifted towards the importance of public space, qualities of city lounges, green ambiances. Ground scraping instead of sky scraping. All from the perspective of the users, citizens instead of developers. Experience economy more than down town economy. Which means understanding the importance of the city as meeting point and place of exchange. The new Central Station represents far more than a mobility hub. The Market Hall is far more than a collection of food vendors. All a sign of architectural sparkle and impact.

- The city at eye level. A long-neglected perspective on city spatial planning is now in full swing. Understanding how people use the city in their specific routines and so give meaning to places is a new mission. In 1995 we thought more conceptual and from a bird’s-eye view about cities and their possible development. Nowadays the accent shifts toward a more behavioural approach (see the growing attention for data).

- Being called on by many occasions we now think different about the presence and possibilities of the Maas river itself. Strongly related to the central issue of water management and environmental qualities the river is a ‘place’ instead of a pure functional asset to the harbour with adjacent banks to redevelop.

- Even in the maximisation scenario the city recognises itself. Global business see and use the city more and more as a very important data source to exploit. This issue was not seen at all in the nineties.

- Migration (all times in the DNA of Rotterdam) was on the agenda then but not in the full complexity and intensity of
today. The refugee issue causes lots of problems in the city despite the positive narrative and promises of ‘arrival city’.

- What years ago, was presented as the new phenomenon of participative, sharing based economy (scenario 2?) has now developed as hard boiled business\(^5\) (scenario 1). It is not clear what the gains and losses for the city are.
- Finally the public safety issue. At that time we organised some cameras and surveillance programmes and thought the job was done. Now there are real problems in the city. The idealistic attitude of yesterday has gone.

**Some critic remarks afterwards.**

The scenarios written were not taken for granted. Especially not by the design people, the architects. Maybe they felt restricted in their creating capacities. Sometimes they misunderstood the essence of scenario thinking. They are not typical ‘what if’ thinkers. Architects like the exclamation mark more than the question mark. This teaches us to involve them as participants from the beginning. On the other hand, it’s important that scenarios can have a dual effect on design. As input for an urban planning or design process on the yet to make proposals. And on the other hand, to question and test the designs presented on their tenability. Scenarios are a research tool rather than a given framework. They explore the range of possible solutions.

**The Laurens quarter**

“*On the origin of the city, the destruction of the core and the rise again during decades.*”

Diagnosis in 1995.
This city area (city centre east) was seen as ‘a pars pro toto’ for the 50 years on-going reconstruction of the demolished centre. Density,

\(^5\) Airbnb, Uber Google etc.
intensity of use, quality of public space, diversity of functions, image and earning capacity corresponded more with outskirts of the city than with the central position of it. Contrasts with the adjacent business, shopping and theatre centre (city centre west) are huge. Buildings are introvert, functional flexibility is low, housing is under developed. Never the less the historic load is paramount. The basic gene of the city is to be found there: the dam in the Rotte. What to do? How to depict new perspectives?

Two designers were asked, or invited to write their authentic opinion on how to handle the scenario given to them followed by a design strategy. Both did so under contrasting and appealing mottos.

I  Van Sambeek cs.: “Memory and continuing change”.

II  Wiel Arets cs.: “Unpredictable repetition of strange bodies”.

Ad I
In essence this contains an analysis of the area in the crucial years 1593, 1850, 1930, 1940 and 1995. Superposing images of respective morphology and spatial structure show the strategic sites. Ready for an intervention with impact as well as being sensible for the history. They can be seen as independent of each other and fit in a proven city structure. They are connected to relevant public space in order to make places for people. They re-animate history in a modern way. There is no ‘plan’ as such because cities don’t develop according to plans.
Quote:
“We notice instantly that by making research maps, other parties involved in the project recognised all sorts of starting points for qualities fully out of sight. In 2010 you have reached already a lot by just going with the flow. On strategic locations, you further develop the Laurens quarter as a modern city, in confrontation with the areas already existing. Streets and squares are the prime concern for the city administration. Next to it the city should develop with more density and mix of functions. This should be based on the structure and not on buildings. Structure is a matter for the city, buildings is for architects”.

Ad II
The area should be ‘infected’ with tree powerful interventions (virus). The old fashioned urban planning schemes and design is obsolete. Maintain urban tissue, street patrons and building blocks as known are no longer the solution. Interventions which don’t anticipate on an existing context but create new programme, identity and impact of its own. These three suggested interventions are situated along the conceptual axis. The Binnenrotte defined for intensified urban living. The ‘unpredictable’ is given by the fact that the architect has no decisive role, as the person who should produce predictable architecture.
Quote:
“Our volumes should be partly hidden from the eye. Form is quite simple (‘stealth’ bomber alike) without whims. This has nothing to do with new aesthetics, only with different functionality. I think we should talk about cities in terms of scenarios, functionality, logistics and not in terms of choice of materials and façade images”.

Quote:
“We suggest three interventions in the city. The city follow its own rules to which we want are pliable. On the other hand, the city has to respond to our plans. This interaction I call morality. It’s a dialogue. In a dialogue, you change words and sentences, you understand each other and at the same time not. This tension is part of urbanity”.

Finally

1
Is scenario thinking (as tool to investigate the future) still useful? Is the search for and definition of dilemmas necessary to unfold and question future images and plans? Is it worthwhile to try to reconcile dilemmas as a next step to solutions? Urban planning is an uncertain affair. Grand visions are by some people seen as ‘elephants’ blocking a clear view on what’s coming ahead. The ultimate expressions about the future are often ‘narratives’ and ‘dots on the horizon’. Mainstream now in urban policies of ‘facilitating, connecting, adapting and bottom-up thinking’.

2
While challenges occur ever faster outside the direct domain of governments the need for future perspectives and –strategies for the city region is eminent. Or better, a constant state of alertness instead of plans. Players and competitors in the field of the so called ‘next economy’ are exploiting the city for their own profit. A new balance and interaction between public and private is at stake. What’s the role of city government in this new game of powers? Is there an evident shift at hand from physical planning to influencing the behaviour of citizens focused on managing and experiencing the city and the public domain in particular? In 1995 this was not seen as a dilemma.
Looking back on what we did 20 years ago we see some striking issues. First it is not easy to explain the aims and purpose of working with scenarios to outsiders (i.e. people not directly involved in the constructing of them). In essence it’s about an interpretation of the presence connected with possible futures. It’s not a matter of choosing the most desirable one. Scenarios create a common bedding for understanding and creativity. They offer a possibility to look at design proposals and plans from different angels of interest. In fact they are a mutual coherent set of hypothesis constructed and based on the knowledge of people who are able to oversee a specific field of interest and trends.

In the case of manifestation, the scenarios were also a challenge for the ‘designers’ of the city. They were given the opportunity to free themselves from the constraints of their specific commissioners. To look behind the given planning horizons. The challenge was to find a new beckoning perspective, new cohesive ideas. Make proposals the city can fight for instead of going with the flow. This was not really achieved. Looking to the two mentioned elaborations for the Laurens quarter we find all the well-known elements fitting in either scenario. No new perspective was given. No reconciliation of dilemmas was realized.

Than the matter of scale. Not all the project subjected to the scenario method can bear the weight and impact of them. There should be a certain seize of scale. In fact, the city region is a proper scale. This because the robust trends and dilemmas work on that level. The Laurens quarter is in fact to small and therefore we see it as a pars pro toto, i.e. the challenge to reconstruct the whole central area and to strive for more functional mix and diversification of program away form the CIAM concept of the post war period.
Although the manifestation was an inspiring event and created much enthusiasm, it was a pity that it was ‘over’ at a certain moment. That means there was no ‘after sales’, no follow up further developing the and applying the method. The ‘what if’ question was hardly on the agenda of the Rotterdam urbanists the decades after. While in my opinion this was necessary to give the Rotterdam pragmatic way of city planning a more firm and critical basis. The ‘control room’ of the city is much more crowded since 1995. At that time land use, developing budgets, planning skills and powers were centralized. Nowadays it’s dealing and wheeling with many different stakeholders. A reason to enter this arena with a good and continuous updated package of knowledge, or better questions about times ahead of us. Just like a company of Shell does on a daily basis.

The six projects (Laurens quarter being one of them) are subjected to the impact of the scenarios. Defined generally in spatial terms: structure, urban lay out, conceptual ambition, intervening abilities by either government or market. The overall image is that of ‘making’ the city instead of ‘being’ a city. The focus was the urge to approach several objectives on a top down manner. The opposite of an approach using perspectives of a great variety of users (citizens as well as businesses) which was under-exposed. Nowadays we see the daily routines and behaviour of people and how they have impact on places and give specific meanings important for the qualities of the city and the public domain.
Some conclusions and points for discussion

Bottom line: keep your ‘windows’ open, keep on asking ‘what if’ questions, construct ‘memories’ of the future⁶, look at the present as references for the future, be sure that scenarios are formulated by those directly involved and asked to use them. The best scenario effect is an ‘aha!’ effect “wait a minute, this we have to involve in our work”.

1. Important shifts in design- and development practices have occurred in the last decades: more emphasis on the importance of ambiance and quality of the public domain in the inner city. A growing importance of the so called ‘experience economy’ (meaningful places for meetings, exchanges and socialising). Even more attention for the city ‘at eyelevel’ which is a shift away from the emphasis of the city as a ‘high rise concept’. How to continue this ‘scenario’?

2. More and more the city is a target aimed at by global ICT based forces. Or better seen by them as resources to extend their activities in a comprehensive way: ‘data city’. There is much debate how to regulate this new private, disruptive wave in relation the public interest, public domain and privacy. No longer it be a gentle form of ‘sharing’ economy: it’s about the importance of city shaping. How to play this game? What role is there for city government (go with the flow, or correct where needed)? Whose city is at stake?

3. Trends in the city can develop very fast. Expectations can turn to be wrong. Markets can go overheated. Reactions on them are (too) slow, regulations are lacking behind. The city needs two ‘legs’ to stand on: a long term one for good direction and a short term one for quick response. The relation and balance between those two skills are part of effective scenario work. How can that be achieved in these times of complexity and uncertainty?

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⁶ ...according to Pierre Wack
4. Scenarios and related dilemmas can work in two ways. Either as input in advance for new developments and design proposals to introduce a proper range of possible solutions. Or to question, examine them being made but before approval to maximize their tenability.

5. It is worthwhile to ‘dig up and dust of’ scenarios made the last decades. To compare them to understand the framework of thoughts and methods and to see and compare what happed since. That is an important learning experience. How fast or slow perspectives, trends, expectations for the future change? Key question is not which one turned into reality? Fortunately, this should never be the case with scenarios.

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