

Sterile Rotterdam?

by *Melisa Vargas Rivera*



Construction of the largest mosque in Europe in the city of Rotterdam which became a concern to the authorities which feared that the city –given the 164 feet height of the mosque’s minarets- would turn into the “Mecca on the Maas”.

Clean intact and safe – these are the new priority aspects of the Dutch policy on public space. ‘Beautiful’ remains important, however ‘clean’ ‘undamaged’ and ‘safe’ are even more important” – is the new philosophy.

Plea for The Public Space
Netherlands Ministry of Housing, spatial planning and Environment (1)

Every week there is a different corner, street, sidewalk, wall or pavement that is being sterilized by the municipality of Rotterdam. In an almost compulsive manner public space becomes the realm where the city’s sins are purged through cleansing rituals that replace slightly dirty or worn tiles with perfectly shiny new ones.

That is a new and valid challenge for the whole of the Netherlands. **‘You actually can’t imagine a bigger project than public space’**, former State Secretary Remkes points out.(2)

The issue of immigration is a latent force that drives the struggle between the city’s administration and the increasing reality of Rotterdam becoming predominantly inhabited by citizens of non Dutch origin (60% of its population is projected to be immigrant by 2017). This reality has produced in the last decade a complete change in the perception of the Dutch community from an open and tolerant one to that of a fearful and reluctant one.

This fear manifests in the production of policies and laws that clearly exclude and reject the presence of immigrant groups with strong religious and cultural character such as the Turkish and Moroccan Muslim groups. This attitude is exemplified through cases like the strong opposition in 2003 to the construction of the largest mosque in Europe in the city of Rotterdam which became a concern to the authorities who feared that the city –given the 164 feet height of the mosque’s

minarets- would turn into the “Mecca on the Maas”.

These arguments attempt to legitimize immigrant-excluding policies as a way of protecting the Dutch cultural image of being an open society and not one that is strongly identified with the presence of an (now fashionably understood as) extremist conservative group. There is a clear paradox between the justifications and the actions themselves when measures like the prohibition of speaking languages other than Dutch in public places (such as restaurants and sidewalks) is now effective.

Public space no longer represents the place for the confrontation of the differences and the creation of collective identities in this city but more the place where shopping and leisure take over in a smooth consenting realm where any one who consumes is invited to be equalized. The celebration of the individual blurs the real forces that now shape the city.

The new test for foreigners who want to apply for Dutch residency is, well, very Dutch. It features a DVD that illustrates various aspects of Dutch life, including, most notably, a topless woman frolicking in the surf and two men kissing warmly. The message couldn’t be more explicit: This is who we are; if you don’t accept it, don’t come. Although the DVD doesn’t single out any particular group, the intended target of the message is clear. Growing numbers of conservative Muslim immigrants are seen by many Dutch as posing a threat to the Netherlands’ liberal consensus and easygoing lifestyle.(3) Nevertheless American and EU member countries citizens don’t have to take the same test.

In December of 2003 the port city of Rotterdam in the Netherlands tried to prevent underprivileged immigrants from moving to the city by refusing public housing to anyone who does not earn a salary of at least twenty percent above the minimum income level. In addition to this, the Rotterdam City Council aimed to put a cap on asylum seekers who wish to become residents of Rotterdam.(4)

But the targets are not only poor non-educated immigrants. Once they have found employment, graduate immigrants have less chance of promotion in later years than their Dutch colleagues(5). This is a topic discussed within the context of a public forum at the Erasmus University of Rotterdam in February of 2006. The question is whether Rotterdam is only keeping its streets “clean”, “undamaged” and “safe” or is it also a clear desire of keeping the whole of the Dutch society uncontaminated? Is it a sign of refusal to adopt changes that come from a notion of integration that not only forces the comers to speak their language and understand their culture but that accepts the native Dutch to also learn from and accept its immigrants?

Public space management that is stubbornly occupied in routinely cleaning up already clean public furniture and replacing paving blocks every month in perfectly functioning commercial pedestrian streets does not address the ongoing problems of a city where segregation and exclusion are intensifying the tensions between social groups.

The ideal of a sparkling untainted city replaces the ideal of a city that is perceived as beautiful not only because of how well kept its infrastructure may be but also because of the kinds of interactions its spaces finally produce; where differences are exactly the generators of identities and the common ground for individuals to confront their conflicts in a civic manner.

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(1) (2) VROM international, Netherlands Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment. <http://www2.vrom.nl> (Nov 19 2006)

(3) Chicago Tribune. Dutch to Muslims: Do you really want to settle here? By Tom Hundley Tribune foreign correspondent. Published April 9, 2006. www.chicagotribune.com

(4) Netherlands: Rotterdam to keep out poorer immigrants. 01 December 2003 . Europe Immigration News, www.workpermit.com

(5) Poor prospects for immigrant graduates in the Dutch workplace. Wednesday 1 February 2006. <http://www.chinainfocus.nl/>