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Festival City – Rotterdam

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In an environment that sees cities vying to attract people, businesses and investments in increasingly competitive markets, many municipalities have identified place identity and image as parts of their unique selling point. The high profile and collaborative nature of festivals means that they are seen by city marketing bodies as an important tool in shaping and widening awareness of the unique qualities of their city's particular cultural and built environments. The extent to which an audience identifies with a festival or a city (and are willing to invest time and money) strongly determines how successful both the festival and the city's further development will be. Accordingly, festivals are being placed at the heart of strategic development of some cities' physical and human infrastructures.

Festival City - Rotterdam is an urban design study that researches the symbiotic collaboration between festivals and urban development to see how they can forge stronger identities for each by working collaboratively. The specific communities that organise and support festivals in Rotterdam are central in this study's findings. Community involvement, the visibility of the festival between editions and the specific audience appeal strongly influence how festivals can be used to catalyse the relationship between the social and urban structure of a city. Without the fertile ground provided by a supporting community, a festival will not flower.

This chapter will examine this strategy in more depth, using two festival case studies from Rotterdam: the *Caribbean Summer* in the Afrikaanderwijk and an example of urban theatre on the Coolsingel. It will also consider *Soundpiece*, an ongoing project on the Schouwburgplein. These case studies and their relationship with Rotterdam's urban development plans are described below.

Rotterdam and its festivals

Rotterdam is a festival city: it is a city where the possibilities of the temporary event are optimally used; where experiments are undertaken and new concepts are developed. Due to this laboratorial function, in which temporary events can mature and in their full maturity can be

tested in the daily situation, new elements can be added to the city in an 'almost natural' way. In this way, the different manifestations, events and festivals create a surplus value and become important test sites for the social, spatial and cultural structure of Rotterdam (De Winter, 1988: 13).

Following World War Two, in which its city centre was heavily bombed, Rotterdam pursued a policy of organising events and temporary constructions to keep its city centre vibrant (De Winter, 1988: 7) and to test the popularity of specific urban amenities (De Winter, 1988: 12). There is a clear and strong connection between the identity of events and the urban redevelopment plan during this period. In the *Ahoy'* (1950) and *E55* (1955)¹ events, Rotterdam celebrated the rebuilding of the harbour and the city after the destruction caused by the war. *C70*, the last large event in the city's redevelopment, took place in 1970, a time when the Dutch population was protesting against the large scale development of the Netherlands, demanding that their cities should be more liveable. With *C70*, the organisers wanted to bring people together through communication (De Winter, 1988: 109). As the city has continued to expand, less space has been left undeveloped, potentially putting the strong unity and cooperation between the city festivals' organisers, artists and architects at risk.

The Spatial Development Strategy 2030

In the Spatial Development Strategy 2030 (Gemeente Rotterdam, 2007), Rotterdam presents itself as an attractive, living city. By building new residential areas and improving the public space, Rotterdam has tried to attract the middle and upper classes to come and live in the inner city. The post war 'viable society' ideology is still very apparent in this document, but the experience that festivals can offer residents and audience is largely ignored, even though studies have shown that two-thirds of Rotterdam's residents visit its festivals and the average visitor defines him or herself as middle class (Rijpsma et al., 2006: 44).

The experiences that festivals offer contribute to the bond that residents have with their city. Rotterdam has a wide variety of festivals and temporary events, ranging from classical concerts in the old harbours, to car races in the inner city; from the marathon to a 'wine and dine' festival. There are some large festivals that attract hundreds of thousands of people, and there is a broad base of small, niche, award-winning festivals spread all over the city. In 2012, Rotterdam Festivals, the organisation responsible for the city's events policy, supported a total of 59 events relating to specific aspects of the

city: maritime, youth, multiculturalism, modern architecture, (international) culture and sports. These were attended by approximately two million visitors in total. One third attracted fewer than 5000 visitors; just over half between 5000 and 50,000 and 9% attracted more than 50,000 visitors (Rotterdam Festivals, 2013). In short, Rotterdam has something to offer the whole year round. For this reason, urban development and festivals should find ways to collaborate symbiotically.

Symbiosis as a strategy

Festivals are the moments of self-celebration of a community (Dayan, 1997).

It is clear that festivals can play a role in urban development; the question is how? "Each ... festival consists of a number of cooperating and conflicting groups of players, forming together a dense latticework of human relations, temporally coexisting in the same time-space capsule" (Dayan, 1997). When thinking about festivals, most people only consider this time-space-capsule, which is the moment where the audience meets the performer. Behind the festival, however, there is an important driving force: the community, for they are the people who prepare the festival and grow with it.

This community is more than merely a group of people with a shared interest; it also has a spatial component. The group of people become a community when they claim a space to meet, prepare and celebrate. The community is essentially the component that creates continuity between festival editions. After all, the festival only exists due to the existence of the community. By supporting their festivals, the city can assist the communities in developing roots. This is the starting point of the symbiotic collaboration between the city and a community/festival. The relationship may create space for the community to further expand, to become breeding grounds, places and institutions that nurture artistic ambition and creative entrepreneurship in the city, attracting new programmes and developing new uses for public space. They can also become the triggers for gentrification processes.

During the festival, the community becomes a part of the public sphere. It is, therefore, important that the city invests in urban meeting spaces where the audience and performers can meet and celebrate the rich diversity of the different communities.