

urban meeting #1, 8 October 2008:

are cities more important than countries?

Jan Pronk and Vedran Mimica

'Cities are not more important than countries', stated Pronk. Cities may promise economic growth, technological progress and intellectual vibrancy. But the middle class, defined as those who live above the level of survival, dominate cities in our globalized world. It is solely in their interest that cities are seen as more important. Cities are the hubs that control markets. Cities are synonymous with "the mass". It's where the majority of votes for politicians are cast. The countryside, on the other hand, is seen as dull, if not dead.

Pronk emphasized the fallacies undermine the suggestion that a city has greater importance by explaining, 'cities are dependent on the countryside. A city is only able to function with support of the countryside (food, fresh air, drinking water, etcetera). To declare cities as being more important than this "real world" beyond the city limits is to put humankind under threat.'

Pronk's main counterargument is that the modernism seen in cities is dualistic, since a growing underclass doesn't appear on city registers. 'No provision is made for them. They have no access to the services enjoyed by others. They don't have a voice.' Pronk also fears that cities are increasingly becoming dumping-grounds where the rejected products from our systems are ditched. Rotterdam is a city that is part of a rich nation that accumulated its wealth through colonizing and the protection of its domestic market. We are using Third World countries as a tip for surplus products (tomatoes, milk, etcetera) that we don't want flooding our market. We throw their market out of balance because local producers cannot compete with the cut-price products. Mass-migration and fleeing refugees are also an indirect result of Western Europe's so-called "civilized" policies.

The problem is that political leaders often don't care about the holistic picture, they just want to please their own (middle) class. Slum-dwellers are outlaws. Essentially, they have been kicked out of the city centre to make space for the middle class. This phenomenon is also seen in Western Europe. 'The slums spread across the Mediterranean are the slums of Europe.'

Moderator Felix Rottenberg confirmed that the middle class is dominant: 'Even Obama focuses on the middle class!' Also questions and comments fielded from the audience confirmed Pronk's standpoint.

Co-referent Vedran Mimica (director of the Berlage Institute) confronted everyone with the daily realm by pointing at the window view: a huge shopping mall. 'This is paradise for the middle class. How can we make a connection with the poor?' Someone from the public added the question, 'What can planners do?'

Pronk stated that we need a major change in policymaking regarding both the city and the country. We also need political activism. 'Architects and planners should debate serious questions like whether bringing the 2028 Olympics to the Netherlands would be such a good idea. Very little of the supposed trickle-down effect is actually felt in host countries.'

How to translate theory into practice? Mimica referred to the trend for an emphasis on theory as 'the powerpoint syndrome: 'Theoretical solutions should match reality and should stimulate politicians' imagination. Evidence-based design and fieldwork are needed.'

Summarizing Jan Pronk called for responsibility: 'We shouldn't hide behind our professions. Everyone is a citizen and must take responsibility. Cities shouldn't be more important than countries, states or nations. We are part of a whole!'