

urban meeting #3, 28 October 2008:

leading cities

Anthony Williams, Kees Christiaanse and Jantine Kriens

The third Urban Meeting held in Rotterdam as part of the six-lecture series to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Institute for Housing and Urban Development Studies focused on the influence of politics on the social and urban shape of a city. Kees Christiaanse (architect and founder of KCAP, Kees Christiaanse Architects and Planners) opened the meeting with a comparison of two diagrams. The first diagram illustrated the tendency of today's cities to fragment into 'islands', resulting in social segregation. The second diagram was based on a grid that connected those urban 'islands' to enable the city to function cohesively. Christiaanse referred to the latter diagram an 'open city' in which communities can settle and thrive. 'The ideal "open city" fosters cultural exchanges which lead to urbanities and civilities,' he explained. Christiaanse then shared with the audience his urban-planning experience in four different cities (Rotterdam, Hamburg, London and Perm in Russia) by demonstrating the differing relationships between politics, urban planning and implementation in each. Christiaanse elaborated on his conviction that a master plan is a useful instrument saying, 'It is an unofficial legislative document, a political conveyance with many implementations.' Christiaanse took Rotterdam as a case study to show exactly why the inability of many European municipalities to build a shared vision that crosses municipal borders is to be criticized. Christiaanse ended his session by emphasizing the importance of integrated roles, saying, 'The mayor should be an urban designer.'

The keynote speaker to follow, Anthony Williams (former mayor of Washington, DC), took the audience through the management processes that enabled him to turn the negative spiral blighting his home city around by bridging the gap between municipal politicians and the people in individual neighbourhoods. One of his many interesting examples was that every four years he invited 4000 citizens to participate in the strategic planning and evaluation process in a day-long session at the city's convention centre. His goal was to create an inclusive city that functioned as a whole. The inclusive city seemed to be analogous with the model of an open city introduced by Christiaanse. Williams explained: 'As a public servant it's your job to make – and keep – everybody happy. You need to keep yourself informed on how life is lived from the most everyday level up. You have to figure out what the people are going to want before they want it. As a mayor, you are a chief executive and a chief of state.' Adding to Christiaanse's parting comment, Williams stated: 'As mayor you are the defender of the public realm. By nourishing the public realm the mayor will become an urban designer.' Williams highlighted three mayoral planning priorities: making the public realm function; anchoring the design function in the organization; and working with competent professionals.

Moderator Felix Rottenberg asked invitee Jantine Kriens (vice mayor of Rotterdam) if she was jealous on hearing William's success story. Kriens said she wasn't and explained that she shared the same vision as Williams, saying: 'Talking directly to the people is absolutely necessary. As a mayor you should be more than just a symbolic representative, you have to be a part of your city.' Rottenberg then asked if the citizens of a city should be able to elect their own mayor. Neither Williams nor Christiaanse saw the value of a referendum, since, they agreed, the influence of the media is too great on the outcome, to the extent that its role can appear as manipulation. Williams felt the progressive movement in the USA had been killed off by 'the dictatorship of the proletariat'. He went even further, saying: 'The voice of people can be like nuclear power, it can destroy a city.'

As the meeting drew to a close, Christiaanse asked Williams if Obama would be the first urban president, as, he said: 'All presidents now seem to reign in a suburban way.' A clear Barak supporter, Williams answered devotedly: 'He is not the only president to grow up in the city, but he will probably be the first one who can speak the language of the city.'