

Urban Meeting 5: Inclusive Cities

21 November 2008



The fourth Urban Meeting held in Rotterdam as part of the six-lecture series to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the Institute for Housing and Urban Development took Inclusive Cities as its focus. Dennis Kaspori (architect and founding member, The Maze Corporation) was the first to speak, stating that he no longer saw communal space as a given. 'In the Netherlands,' he said, 'public spaces are regulated zones that are organized as traffic space. We need to rethink the organization, to promote active citizenship so individuals are not just a user but also can take part in the creation process.' Using examples from his practice's projects to illustrate each point, Kaspori presented a four-pronged approach to improving public space. He outlined the following:

- 1) Open source architecture, which involves the public in the design process itself;
- 2) Instant urbanism, where a given space contains a mix of functions, and local residents are encouraged to create small-scale interventions;
- 3) Cultural entrepreneurship, which capitalizes on the social and cultural resources available;
- 4) 'More friction please', which is Kaspori's straightforward request for more public space.

Kaspori concluded by stating he saw public space as the key to an inclusive city, a comment which resounds with the view expressed by Kristian Koreman at an earlier meeting (see Safe Cities summary).

With 'From fear to hope' as his slogan, Francesco Orsini (engineer and IHS alumnus) took to the floor next, presenting concepts from the strategy he devised for the Proyecto Urbano Integra (PUI) in Medellin, Colombia.

Orsini contextualized the project, explaining that during the 1950s and 1960s Medellin had expanded explosively. Mass in-migration from rural areas resulted in the structure of the city changing drastically. Overcrowded slums, which occupied more than half the city's urban area, had become severely congested, exacerbating a growing social inequality. A second problem was the violence, deep-rooted in the area, which was also where FARC and Pablo Escobar, the head of a drug's cartel, operated. During the administration of Mayor Sergio Fajardo (2004-2007) a new formula was introduced with the intention of curbing physical and social problems by reducing violence and immediately carrying out social intervention. The PUI strategy was born: a master plan which worked in combination with 'acupunctural' projects and community involvement. 'The public is the main player,' said Orsini, '90 per cent of the effort came from the community.' Useful insertions in public spaces created in the densely-populated areas were combined with 'smart infrastructure', in this case a metro-cable transport system, which enabled those living in poverty to gain access to the central city, and consequently opportunities to attain employment and improve their living conditions. The PUI strategy also initiated the creation of parks, an iconic library, schools and a centre for entrepreneurship and housing. Thanks to the efforts of PUI, violent crime levels have dropped, with 26 killings reported in 2007 compared to 381 during 1991.

The third speaker Peter van der Gugten (CEO, Proper-Stok Groep) presented a confronting vision of the Dutch situation. While he affirmed the importance of decent public spaces, he said: 'A physical space is not enough on its own. We have to give local residents the belief that a better neighbourhood will evolve.' In a brief overview of the Netherlands' planning history, Van der Gugten explained: 'Until the late 1990s, municipalities and social housing associations created the majority of new dwellings and facilities. But today the role of the municipality is not as strong as it once was; meanwhile, housing associations have been privatized. With municipalities no longer able to talk to investors, those private investors have become the most powerful in the equation.' As an example, Van der Gugten cited the privately-initiated Chinese church in the Rotterdam neighbourhood Katendrecht. The church also functions as a school and theatre. Van der Gugten: 'I see this church as creating the opportunity to make a profit on the dwellings. The church invests in good public space and gives people hope.'

Moderator Felix Rottenberg invited each of the speakers to give a short definition of an inclusive city. Orsini responded with, 'Access for all and equal opportunities,' which Kaspori agreed with. Van der Gugten added: 'Basic opportunities are necessary, but people also need a stimulus to reach higher.' In contrast to Orsini's fight for a more formal structure in Medellin, Kaspori suggested that there is a need for a more informal spontaneity in over-planned and rational Dutch suburbs. Van der Gugten disagreed, saying the focus should concentrate on the problems experienced in existing cities rather than new towns or suburbs. Comments fielded from the audience questioned the accountability of private investors. One spectator asked: 'What if policy changes?' in reference to the relocation of inhabitants of Rotterdam's Crooswijk neighbourhood, who were moved and their poor-quality housing demolished to make room for more better quality accommodation. Another audience member stated: 'That's how we create urban nomads.' Rottenberg asked: 'What kind of mentality do we need to make inclusive cities?' to which Van der Gugten replied: 'No informality without a good formal framework.' Kaspori: 'We need to be open towards others and listen to their point of view.' Orsini concluded by saying: 'We need public space to be a place where everyone can feel free to be who they want to be.'