

# Rotterdam Skillcity: skill is will

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“Creativity in the world of work is not limited to members of the Creative Class. (...) I strongly believe that the key to improving the lot of underpaid, underemployed and disadvantaged people lies not in social welfare programs or low – end make work jobs (...) but rather in tapping the creativity of these people”(Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, p. 10)

Rotterdam Skillcity is a research model for urban revitalisation and renovation, focused on the specific social-cultural and socio-economic situation of Rotterdam. Having transformed itself over a period of 40 years from an industrial harbour town with an international exposure to an economic-cultural metropolis, famous for its architectural landscape, his urban festivals and top sport events, Rotterdam strives to harbour service oriented enterprises, creative industries and information technologically based business.

Traditionally Rotterdam was dependent upon the immigration of low paid labourers, most of whom populated the socio-culturally weaker developed neighbourhoods of Rotterdam. After the post war immigration wave from Greece, Spain and Italy, in the course of the 1960's of the 20<sup>th</sup> century immigrants arrived, mostly from countries like Turkey and Morocco, but over time from all those countries that want to profit from the globalisation process. On top of that the decolonisation process resulted in the immigration of people from Surinam and Antilleans.

Over a period of 40 years the socio-economic infrastructure of Rotterdam qualitatively changed, An international harbour turned into a global business area as a result of which more sophisticated and technologically enhanced skills were demanded. Recently the Economic Development Board Rotterdam (EDBR) advocates creative industries as a cultural-economic impulse of the urban economy.

However, in this turbulent process of urban upgrading many lower paid and lesser schooled groups within the population are not able to connect, many a pupil leaving school before attaining even the most basic starting qualifications that are needed for entering the job market. Unemployment within these groups is beyond the national average.

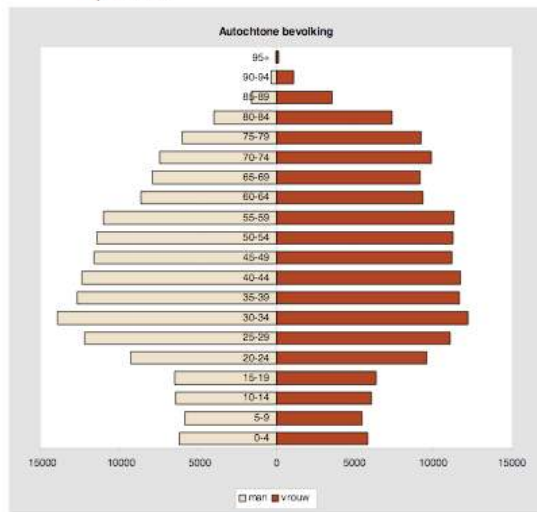
Rotterdam Skillcity not only provides a bottom up analysis of this socio-economic backlog, it also develops educational and socio-economic strategies to counter these tendencies. In doing this Richard Florida's concept of cultural capital and his analysis of the creative city is downscaled to the neighbourhood level and Robert Putnam's critique on the loss of social capital and his appeal to enhance 'civic skills' is applied to rephrase the concept of social cohesion.

## **BASIC ASSUMPTIONS OF THE RESEARCH MODEL**

### ***Demography: 'greening' of the population***

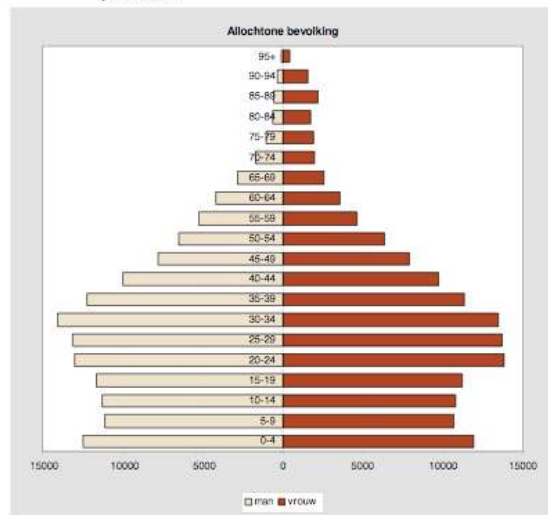
One of the presuppositions of Skillcity is a demographic tendency that deviates from national averages. Instead of facing a 'gray wave' – the disproportional increase of the elderly - the Rotterdam population will be 'greened' over the next 10 years. This increase is mostly effectuated within families with an allochtonous background. Rotterdam harbours more than 160 nationalities and the percentage of the population with an allochtonous background is nearing 60%.

Figuur 2-1 Verdeling van de autochtone Rotterdammers naar leeftijdscategorie, januari 2003



Bron: GBA, bewerking COS

Figuur 2-2 Verdeling van de allochtone Rotterdammers naar leeftijdscategorie, januari 2003



Bron: GBA, bewerking COS

### ***Primary school: Educational deadlock***

The educational system gradually got overburdened. Since the necessary broadening of the school tasks – de Brede School - in order to counter the loss of social infrastructure partly due to flexibilisation of the job market, partly to the deregulation and privatisation of the socio-cultural backbone of community services (maatschappelijk middenveld), teachers no longer can adequately perform their core business of teaching.

### ***Secondary school: Lack of trainee posts***

At the same time secondary school system deteriorated. Mergers between smaller school units were propagated as a result of which school life became more anonymous and less controllable. Playing truant and prematurely leaving school go hand in hand with a structural lack of trainee posts.

### ***Gentrification***

Overdue maintenance in the socio-economic weaker neighbourhoods led to the deterioration of real estate. Building corporations changed their policies in the 1990's due to the privatisation and deregulation policies of the Dutch government. As a result of the withdrawal of governmental institutions from public space, getting semi-privatized and deregulated, the quality of public space deteriorated as well.

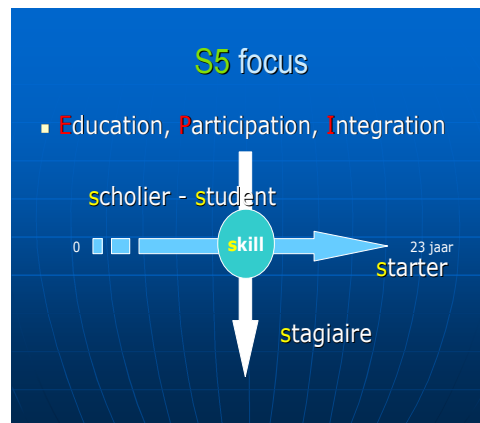
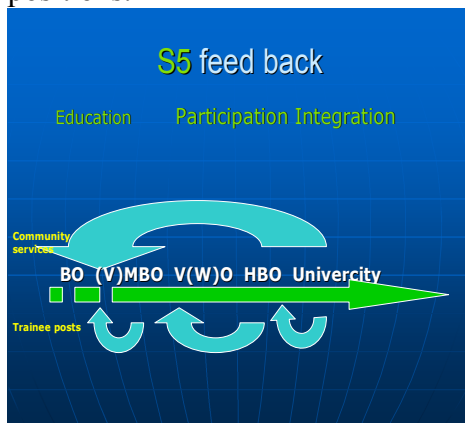
### ***Ecological footprint***

Being an industrial area for more than a century, providing unlimited automobility due to the post war urban planning, air pollution in Rotterdam has reached intolerable limits. Recently this has been acknowledged by local policymakers and politicians. This resulted in subscribing the Clinton initiative. But being embedded in the global consumerist culture the excessive consumption of fast food has not strengthened the physical awareness of the ecological food chain. This has again placed Rotterdam at the top of the obesity ridden areas. The percentage of children and adults suffering from overweight is disproportionately high.

## **FOUR TARGETS FOR INTERVENTION**

### ***'Skill is will'***

The crucial concept of the research model Rotterdam Skillcity is skill. This covers a wide range of competences that are realized within practices of actual craftsmanship. Apart from the conventional definitions of craftsmanship, skill has artistic, sportive, cultural, social and communicative connotations. Moreover, skating, rapping, judo techniques, school mediation, preparing food, all of these practices presuppose a specific attitude. Eventually skill is a double edged sword: socio-culturally it gives the skilled person a certain esteem within his or her community – (s)he is taken serious - and socio-psychologically it provides the skilled person with a crafty focus and engenders a feeling of proportionality and a sense of limit. Focused on skills, wills are produced. All this can be realized by looping apprenticeship trajectories, trainee posts and community services by students of professional and academic institutions back into the whole educational trajectory, beginning with the primary school. This will not only provide assistance – 15 year old students of intermediate vocational education (MBO) assisting with sport or cultural activities on primary school – and vocational expertise – 19 year old students of higher vocational education (HBO) assisting in care or classroom – or even academic expertise – economy students helping starting entrepreneurs with an allochthonous background to make a business plan – but also role models for youngsters that needs pro active scenario's to compensate for their less favourable starting positions.



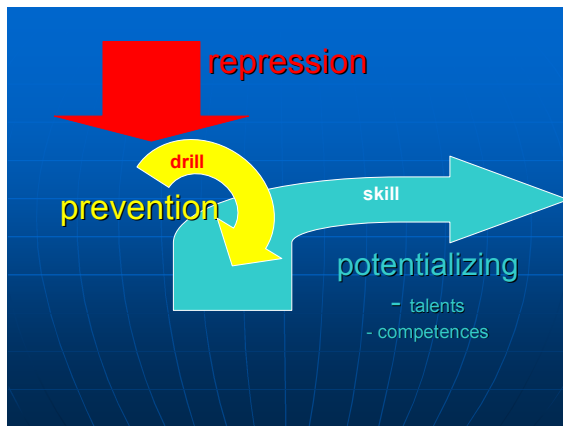
### ***'Being interested'***

In referring to craftsmanship skill includes education and apprenticeship. Within the context of secondary education being skilled brings to the fore the relevance of training posts and, especially in relation to social and cultural skills, community services. Against this background it is evident that being skilled is per se not an individual, but a collective and concrete practice. The invested creativity does not refer to an autonomous individual, but is always already 'interested', i.e. embedded in social, cultural and economic networks. Given this educational and professional perspective skill is embedded in a career, in a more contemporary terminology: it is a stage on a trajectory that crosses other trajectories, all eventually knitted into a network. In an educational perspective this network provides a social safety net. 'Being interested' is skill's main interest and it is precisely in this strict interpretation of the Dutch word 'interesse' that we 'are'(*esse*) always 'in between' (*inter*).

### ***'Rules of engagement'***

Being interested presupposes a positive attitude and a receptive mind. Within the present culture of fear this receptiveness is rather exceptional. Security policies and nodal surveillance are the imperatives of tackling the problem of religious and political radicalisation and socio-political indifference as has been conceptualized in the Research Report of the Scientific Council for Governmental Policies (WWR) 'Geloven in het publieke domein' (Believing in

the public domain) from 2006. Rotterdam Skillcity acknowledges the necessity to counter the aggression in public domain, but opts for a transformation of repressive, restrictive and even preventive measures into social and cultural enhancement of competences and talents in order to engage groups with society from a positive enhancement of their creative sources. This engagement has integrally to be taken into account within the educational trajectory that spans the primary, secondary and higher education up to an academic level. Professional and social skilling reinforces social cohesion, i.e. engenders social capital once it is performed through community services within the communities where pupils and students factually live. Skilling is one of the main rules of engagement.



***‘Ecotriptide’: physical, social, mental***

Focusing solely on physical and material aspects of bio systems provides too strict a definition of ecology. The scope of urban life surpasses this strict definition of ecological processes by far. Rotterdam Skillcity propagates a threefold interpretation of ecology that includes all aspects of an ecological awareness that is needed to tackle the problems where Rotterdam is faced with. The creation of ‘child friendly neighbourhoods’ does not exclusively entail the reducing of CO<sup>2</sup> emission in pushing back the use of private cars – auto mobility – by stimulating public transportation – commobility. It also need the strengthening of social cohesion and the empowerment of groups and individuals in order to enhance engagement. Physical ecology therefore presupposes a social ecology: the development of socio-cultural skills. But as long as this social ecology is not yet anchored in a mentality of openness and receptiveness, i.e. as long as it is not back up by a mental ecology, the problem is not attacked at its roots (*radix*). In this sense the approach of Rotterdam Skillcity is radical.