

## **'Het Dakpark' a Roof Park in Rotterdam as international example for multifunctional double space use**

***Stef Janssen, Manon Nagelkerken***

### **Introduction**

The unique Roof Park Rotterdam 'Het Dakpark' is the first public roof park of its kind in Europe. The 9 hectares elongated park above BigShop-shop centre is realized with European Union regional fund. Premise for funding was the original ambition of the voluntary organizing community to spend extra attention to necessary proactive neighbourhood regeneration and community development of the involved resident communities around the new 'Dakpark Rotterdam'.

The park is located in the west side of the city of Rotterdam and it is embedded in the area of *Stadshavens*, where the Municipality and the Port Authority defined a regeneration program to improve the former port areas with new urban functions. The building of the park was concluded in 2014 and the design was made by architects Buro Sant en Co (fig.1).

This paper aims to highlight the point of view of the community since the Dakpark project arose from a local community initiative. With this purpose, the article has mainly an interview structure giving voice to the Vision Chairman of the foundation 'Dakpark Rotterdam': Stef Janssen.

(Fig.1) The Dakpark from north-west in the 'harbour strip'. On the background: city center skyline.  
Author: Stijn Brakkee.

After for years of attractive 'super use' of the park it is time to prepare new opportunities and experimental status for the park and its volunteers. That is at least the opinion and mission of Stef Janssen, vision chairman since march 2015: «As far as I am concerned our foundation will become step by step a cooperative, creative, and social enterprise for and by the people. As such we will always be ready for change and ready to embrace new nature-inclusive opportunities. By that our community is to promote and choose the specific wanted empowerment solutions for the different neighbourhood communities around our park».

### **'Dakpark Rotterdam' as an innovative international platform for upper city development**

Stef Janssen: «In 2012 I was standing on a roof terrace, on the other side of the road next to the actual building site of our roof park Dakpark Rotterdam. The park, highly innovative erected both on

the huge rooftop of the new built BigShop-centre and an existing sea wall, was heavily under construction at that time.

From the terrace above I had a beautiful overview over the building activity below me. I became aware of the fact that I was spectating a really unique, alive and kicking, building process.

How was that possible? That must have been the question, that has kept me busy, when I was enjoying the changing panorama of the Rotterdam harbour at that moment.

Nowhere else in Rotterdam, the Netherlands or even in the EU such building process is going on. The worldwide economic crisis had on that specific moment led in to a complete 'lock in' in all sectors of the building industry and social economic life in general. Rotterdam was in the middle of the crisis, like all other European cities...everywhere building processes had come to a halt. Could somebody explain to me what was going on below me please? I was so much thrilled by all what I saw. I wanted to know and understand more, much more!

It became perfectly clear to me that especially residents of Rotterdam had, in one way or the other, made the difference that got the Dakpark Rotterdam erected. Those residents understood their task. They had been able to succeed their huge ambitions in a highly remarkable urban transformation process, unique as it is, in its kind and its scale. A smart self-organised proactive local residents' community had been able to realise an extraordinary niche transition project, and at the same time they had created all necessary comfort to resist the impact of the overwhelming economic crises with their very effective human effort. The involved residents had proved their hidden, but above all splendid neighbourhood skills to get done what had to be done locally in many years before already!» (fig.2).

When Janssen became Vision Chairman of the Dakpark Foundation in march 2015, he was convinced that everything what was going on at Dakpark Rotterdam was perfectly organised and would be under control.

Janssen: «When all those motivated people had been able to establish this all under harsh conditions. Our enthusiastic volunteers would really know how to deal with wanted integrated sustainable development and management of our park. Indeed, I thought that there was, as already indicated, a proven and solid fundament for a fortunate future for effective maintenance. Almost 20 years of negotiations with the different departments of Rotterdam municipality and other careful preparations by our Dakpark volunteers and its original initiators had assured me of a hassle-free future. But in reality that didn't seem to be the case at all.

Our problem is that our park-community is not really allowed by the Rotterdam authority, to do what is agreed before and self-evident for the natural existence and social and economic local maintenance of Dakpark Rotterdam. So we have to reposition ourselves as stakeholder of our park again, so soon after the opening of the park, to protect and realise our shared ambitions with the people of Rotterdam, the municipality itself and the European Union.

We have to introduce new arrangements to create more opportunities for our volunteers and their neighbourhoods.

That is from my point of view as Vision Chairman of our Dakpark Foundation unbelievable, but really true in the same time, in our actual situation in Rotterdam. But we have to deal with the local circumstances as they are, although in the meantime the economic crisis seems to be under control and everybody expects and needs a new perspective. We will continue to organize and work on our future, in an again attractive and of course challenging creative way with everybody involved. Only doing that is the option!»

### **The need for a radical change from principal community involvement to business like community involvement in and outside Rotterdam**

The roof park development is recognised internationally by the European Committee of the European Union as an example of a successful of a niche-transition project by and for the people. This means that the Rotterdam municipality, as a strong partner for community-development, has already long ago made de choice for new arrangements for neighbourhood communications. The question is why this highly interactive effective approach, successfully used during the development process of Dakpark Rotterdam, is not operational, immediately after the official happy opening of the Dakpark? There seems to be a difference for officials the Rotterdam authority before the making of our park and after that? Why do Dutch local authorities still expect volunteers to drop back on a not at all desirable obeying participation role, which puts them behind in the cooperation with municipality-officials? For sure the active Dakpark-community wants to emancipate and want to share responsibilities with the Dutch authorities to create and demonstrate new nature-inclusive arrangements and needed nature based solutions on Dakpark Rotterdam for the people of Rotterdam. They even want to create attractive nature nearby jobs to fight high unemployment for youth. That is a great ambition. That is necessary in Rotterdam.

Everybody can understand that it is far more logical, in times of fast changing time frames, that municipalities in the Netherlands would proudly choose to facilitate and comfort experienced creative volunteers to create new opportunities for their neighbourhoods themselves.

Why it is not common yet, in the Netherlands (but certainly also in other countries in the European Union) that authorities embrace fully nature based solution introduced by smart community involvement? What's wrong about people initiative and in general the actually fast rise of the creative class in challenging cities?

Janssen indicates that the background for this typical Dutch situation is that the backbone for community participation is based on principal involvement of volunteers. Janssen is mentioning: «In daily practice principal participation is creating more and more social stress when public agreements are not any more formalised in sufficiently qualified public contracts. It makes the status quo ruling. Ordinary anonymous not properly discussed bureaucratic rules and routines becomes suddenly and unexpected dominant in the communication with motivated volunteers or proactive citizens in general. The hidden agenda which often occurs then; is the conflicting and disrespectful attempt of municipality officials to save some public money (for extra green investments) across the back of the same necessary volunteers to run the initiative. In crises circumstances the effect of this all is cumulating in the wrong way».

The result is always more or less the same. Disappointed volunteers are confronted with the fact that their expertise is more or less denied by non-cooperative, or very slow operating officials of the local authority. Their claim is that even very experienced volunteers must have to obey sooner or later their introduced bureaucratic settings for wanted neighbourhood actions.

The need for radical change to overcome this kind of social issues is already many times described in scientific books and papers worldwide. It is known that local authorities should more and better honour people creative contributions in the public arena. It is clear that in times of fast social and economic change the built environments can't transform fast enough at all. But citizens can alter their life patterns much easier! If necessary, like the discussed Dakpark casus, volunteers and residents' communities must get the opportunity to reorganise themselves by creating new arrangements for business like involvement and participation in the public arena.

Janssen: «This means that citizens must have the radical new opportunity to run their initiative as a social business based on social recognized and respected new written contracts in cooperation with officials of local authorities in and outside Rotterdam in the Netherlands. That opportunity we need to establish! Please, let's leave the old tradition of principal participation far behind us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? It is logical right now that our volunteers and residents community will claim their role as stakeholders. They make Dakpark Rotterdam into an alive and kicking bio diverse environment. Let us celebrate that lucky Rotterdam circumstance with everybody now, soon after that, and later».

### ***From a static real estate approach into a dynamic 'living good'-approach for our Dakpark.***

The classical idea of the use of a park of city nature in general is that people are expected to enjoy the silence, maybe experiencing the noise of some birds, or the serenity of the surrounding and the beauty of the especially untouched green environment (fig.3). If you want far more green environment in cities, than you have to give citizens all the opportunities, not only to experience city nature, but let them use the living environment multifunctional in many ways. Janssen: «I don't see our Dakpark as a static real estate object. I also hope that people don't approach the future greening of buildings in and outside Rotterdam as an extra cost item. I expect that they will approach the greening of buildings as a sustainable local investment with long term social economic growing value over coming years».

### ***From a Dakpark Rotterdam-foundation of today into a cooperative social enterprise for tomorrow, and after that...***

Dakpark Rotterdam is already a long time living lab for upper city development. Not only the realization is special but, first of all, the position in the lay out of the city of Rotterdam is unique. Because of its position, so close to old inner city harbours, the park can play an important role in the redevelopment and the regeneration of the fruit-harbour complex (fig.4). At the same time the park can help to improve neighbourhood and city economy. It will help to re-establish real estate value in its direct local surrounding. The Dakpark will comfort residents with sustainable development, community development and with regaining necessary new employment. Of course the Dakpark-community will work on more infra-nature development and bio diversity in Rotterdam. It is worth to underline the participation of the Dakpark in the Green connection-initiative: It is an initiative to create a 7 kilometres long not-disconnected green route around the harbour neighbourhood 'Delfshaven'. Janssen: «That is what we want to achieve with our foundation Dakpark Rotterdam. We want to develop our Dakpark into a cooperative enterprise, which gives us the opportunity to work on more wanted other innovative exploitation options than we have today».

### **A showcase for the future, and an international experimental status to support innovative green initiatives for and by the people of Rotterdam and other cities in the European community**

To conclude, the Dakpark-community would like to help to organise new arrangements for advanced user-friendly multifunctional greening of buildings and smart double space use in general. In that way Dakpark Rotterdam will promote 'super use' of all parks in Rotterdam.

Stef Janssen: «With our foundation and our volunteers we help to take care for political, administrative and official step by step innovation. So our Dakpark community wants to help to establish another far more interactive and promising proactive decision making culture in Rotterdam. We prolong change which will lead to operational options for the people of Rotterdam to level responsibilities in between citizens and authorities, for more appreciated local collective benefit. In this way our Dakpark-community is very busy to establish a participatory set of rules for better communications with the different departments of the municipality of Rotterdam. In interaction with the municipality of Rotterdam the Dakpark Rotterdam Foundation would like to organise an operational 'participatory backbone' which doesn't frustrate our innovative green actions in the

nearby future. Of course we would like to cooperate with other initiatives in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, or the European Union. A new participatory backbone will help to re-position far more innovative green initiatives around us. Not only our park-community wants to emancipate. Other resident-communities are facing the same problems interaction with their municipality».

For more nature-inclusive action by resident communities the Dakpark Foundation has the long term ambition to reposition our Dakpark Rotterdam as an (inter)national 'open air'-laboratory, or a living lab for advanced cities, to be used for experiments to make parks more attractive for smart and climate proof 'super use' for and by the people. Indeed, in order to build a wider, international, community of active citizens, the Dakpark Foundation promotes the sharing of knowledge through its social media and the organization of events (fig.5).



(Fig.1) The Dakpark from north-west in the 'harbour strip'. On the background: city center skyline. Author: Stijn Brakkee.





(Fig.2) Community training about food awareness and health, climate proof and environmental food-production (urban Farming). Author: Stijn Brakkee.



(Fig.3) Camping in the Dakpark: an event to support the 'Rotterdam Roof Days', an initiative organized to promote the greening of roofs. Author: Stijn Brakkee.





(Fig.4) The lively Dakpark and its surroundings. On the background: the famous modern building Haka Gebouw Rotterdam. Author: Stijn Brakkee.



(Fig.5) The annual event 'One sky one world'. Author: Stijn Brakkee.