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Physical Space, Urban Space, Civic Space: Rotterdam's Inhabitants and their Appropriation of the City's Past

Willem Frijhoff

Layers of community memory

Cities are communities of memory.¹ As a body of community-bound inhabitants the city constructs its historical awareness through the appropriation of past experiences and the attribution of meaning in local and supra-local narratives, historical, legendary, or mythical. Memories may be proposed, drafted and organized either by the city's authorities or by particular groups or individuals, but it is always their appropriation that decides about their use, function and meaning for the city's self-understanding.² However, when speaking of construction the historian should be careful. Image, narrative or identity construction is performed in the present but works with elements from the past, close by or far away, appropriated as multi-layered and multi-focused narratives. This is particularly so in local settings, where memory remains much closer to individual experiences and perceptions than at a national scale.

In fact, the city's memory is constantly shaped, appropriated and transformed through the dynamic interplay of the city's three dimensions as a meaningful space. Firstly the *physical* space: the geographical site, the buildings and the cityscape as they have grown throughout history and present themselves at a given moment. Secondly the *urban* space: the city as a planned and administered community (*civitas*), represented as a closed entity with a programmatic and recordable identity. And thirdly the *civic* space: the city as it is culturally appropriated by its inhabitants (*communitas*), as their own personally and collectively owned town. Civic memory discloses itself through the city's daily practice, in the cultural repertoires shared by the native inhabitants and the immigrants,

1 or incidentally in free play with the urban space and memory made
2 available by the city.

3 Physical, urban, and civic memory do not necessarily coincide or
4 even overlap, because inhabitants may go beyond the rulers' intentions
5 or use alternative practices of social or urban intercourse, as Michel de
6 Certeau (1925–1986) showed in his seminal analysis of the practice of
7 everyday life.³ They may also stick to images of the city's community
8 that were once lively experienced but have become obsolete, whereas
9 newcomers may import foreign urban practices or memories, trying
10 to incorporate them into the city's global awareness of itself. Cultural
11 memory, therefore, may well be in contradiction with the physical out-
12 look of the city, and urban and civic memory may occasionally clash.
13 This contribution wants to show some ways of appropriating the city's
14 memory by the inhabitants of a major town of the Netherlands, with
15 a particular history and of national significance: the city of Rotterdam,
16 a conurbation of approximately 1.2 million inhabitants and boasting
17 of its quality as one of the three biggest harbours of the world, and the
18 largest in Europe.⁴

19 Local memory is particularly important in the Low Countries, perhaps
20 more than in the former monarchies that constitute the bulk of Europe's
21 nations. Ever since the Middle Ages the present-day Netherlands has been
22 a country of virtually autonomous and competing towns. It was only after
23 the Batavian Revolution and the Napoleonic era that a unified national
24 consciousness was purposely promoted, but even now Dutch cities cher-
25 ish a strong sense of identity, and indeed of 'particularism', as it is called
26 in Dutch historiography. After the Dutch Revolt the importance of the
27 local factor increased considerably. Instead of a vertical administration
28 under a single head of state, the Dutch Republic organized itself as a
29 horizontal confederation of seven autonomous 'provinces' (territorial
30 states) within which sovereignty was vested in the councils, more pre-
31 cisely in their members, either co-opted or elected. Every city consid-
32 ered itself an independent unity, indeed a city-state, in particular the
33 great commercial centres of Amsterdam and Rotterdam, considerably
34 enlarged by the intake of thousands of immigrants from the southern
35 provinces, from Germany, Britain and Scandinavia, not to speak of Jews
36 from the Iberian peninsula and Central Europe.

37 In the major towns, this sense of civic autonomy was and still is physi-
38 cally expressed in the magnificent town halls in the city centre. Their deco-
39 ration programmes magnify the city's fame, exalt the reasons for the
40 city's pride, including its history, and proclaim the honour and respon-
41 sibilities of the city's rulers. Beside the majestic Town Halls of Antwerp,

Brussels or Leuven in present-day Belgium, the best-known examples in the northern Netherlands are those of Middelburg (late medieval), Amsterdam (built in the 1650s, now the Royal Palace on the Dam square), and Rotterdam. The latter was built between 1914 and 1920 in an eclectic neo-renaissance style purposely incorporating themes and periods of city pride and reminders of local heroes and rulers.

Physical space and urban space

The cultural memory of Rotterdam is embedded in its physical space, but the continuity of its perception has been stricken by the calamities of the Second World War.⁵ Like many other Dutch cities, Rotterdam grew out of a fishing harbour on the river Meuse (Maas) pertaining to the county of Holland. It was only in the last centuries of the Middle Ages that the small market town became a commercial centre in growing competition with Holland's oldest merchant town Dordrecht, about ten miles away on the river Merwede, the major branch of the Rhine. From the sixteenth century, Rotterdam identified itself as a *koopstad*, i.e. a town with a predominantly commercial destiny, ruled by merchants and ship owners.⁶ In the early seventeenth century, the so-called Waterstad extension, built to accommodate the town's expanding commerce, was laid out as a series of richly arrayed canals, next to an area dedicated to shipbuilding and fitting out. Rotterdam boasted an Exchange pre-dating that of Amsterdam, and it was the main harbour for commerce with England and Scotland. The Meuse embankment, called Boompjes after the trees that lined it, was unanimously praised by foreign travellers as one of the most beautiful cityscapes of the Dutch Republic.

It is this commercial self-identification that is probably the most durable element of Rotterdam's urban memory. Commerce, made material in the harbour with which the city developed a twin relationship, distinguished, then separated, itself socially, physically and culturally from the community of inhabitants, but at the same time played a leading role at all levels of the city's decision-making: engaged in the economy, industry, housing, social welfare, and even religion, the commercial elite being in favour of a regime of religious toleration. The dynasties, first of commerce-bound patrician families, then, after the Revolution, of male 'harbour barons' (*havenbaronnen*) and allied families of bankers and other professionals, quite often immigrants, have ever since constituted the town's social elite – such as the Van Hoboken, Van Ommeren, Ruys, De Monchy, Plate, Van der Vorm, Swarttouw, Veder, Kröller, Müller, Smit, Van der Mandele, Mees, s'Jacob and Dutilh families.

1 Perpetuating the city's commercial and shipping memory, they devel-
 2 oped on a purely private basis characteristic practices in the urban space:
 3 charity, social housing developments, cultural incentives and sponsor-
 4 ship of local community assets such as foundations, societies, collec-
 5 tions of art and history, and museums.⁷ Among the most important are
 6 the Boymans–van Beuningen Museum – in the 1980s extended with a
 7 new wing for the latest van Beuningen collection⁸ – and the Atlas van
 8 Stolk, the remarkable print collection of the timber merchant of that
 9 name. Much more than any other Dutch town, including Amsterdam,
 10 Rotterdam has been – and probably still is – the city of private initiative
 11 for the benefit of the community, including the construction of early
 12 garden cities like Tuindorp Vreewijk on the left bank, conceived as early
 13 as 1913 by Van der Mandele and Mees for the 'less well-to-do classes'.

15 Urban space and civic space

17 Before the destruction wrought by war, Rotterdam's central area was
 18 very densely built – even more than Amsterdam, since, despite the
 19 fourfold increase in its population in the period up to the end of the
 20 nineteenth century, the city limits had not been extended after their
 21 early-seventeenth-century expansion. Rotterdam was above all a work-
 22 ing city (*werkstad*), without any administrative institutions other than
 23 the commercial offices of the East and West India Companies and the
 24 Admiralty, and, after the Revolution, the bonded warehouse (*Entrepot*),
 25 maritime offices, and head offices of some financial giants.⁹ Since it
 26 could boast of few really beautiful buildings, objects of public expendi-
 27 ture, or public institutions, the city's memory fixed itself much less on
 28 urban aesthetics than was the case with the much-lauded city outlay of
 29 Amsterdam. Ever since the nineteenth century Rotterdam had become
 30 a *transitopolis* with a public space lacking grace, of a rather common if
 31 not ugly aspect, dominated by the functionalism of the ever-growing
 32 harbour.

33 Rotterdam's civic memory fixed itself on the home-grown cultural
 34 practices of its commercial and patrician elites and its popular tradi-
 35 tions, and on the civic dimensions of its social intercourse, appropriated
 36 as centuries-old features of the city's identity. It commemorated the
 37 character of its inhabitants as traditionally reflected in the unadorned
 38 design of the city and its buildings, in a spirit of working instead of
 39 spending, of living soberly together in the closely-knit communities
 40 of its numerous small alleys instead of displaying luxury in precious
 41 mansions, and of being tolerant towards the ideas and religious feelings

1 of other people – citizens, immigrants and foreigners alike. Gradually
2 the town was redefined as a typical werkstad with a matter-of-fact and
3 down-to-earth mentality, opposed to financial, cultural and highbrow
4 Amsterdam and to government-bound The Hague, but also moving
5 away from the beautiful physiognomy of the early modern koopstad it
6 once had been.¹⁰ Beauty had, in fact, become a purely private feature.
7 Even the public park, 58 hectares in central Rotterdam, was the private
8 property of the ship owner Van Hoboken until 1924.

9 In *Physiologie van Rotterdam*, a satirical description of the city's popula-
10 tion published in 1844, four categories of citizens and their life styles
11 are distinguished: the small but solid commercial and financial elite
12 (the 'decent youngsters') close to the upper middle classes (the '*Jannen*',
13 who follow and imitate the elite), oppose the lower middle classes (the
14 '*Pieten*'), and the mass of the population 'at the crossing between man
15 and brute animal', who consciously reject elite culture (the '*Huipen*').¹¹
16 What was then and probably remains characteristic of Rotterdam is
17 the cultural distance between the city's traditional elites and the global
18 population, native or immigrant. In the absence of a notable middling
19 group, the social distance between the upper categories and the other
20 communities continues to persist, notwithstanding the rise of modernity
21 in the urban community during the pre-war period, and of present-day
22 gentrification.¹²

23 Two major developments changed the physical space of the city in the
24 nineteenth century: as population grew from 60,000 in 1809 through
25 90,000 in 1849 to 318,000 in 1900 and 580,000 in 1938, the city broke
26 out of its seventeenth-century walls and started to expand on the right
27 bank of the Meuse, around the old nucleus; simultaneously, the com-
28 mercial elite developed both the harbour, by digging a new waterway
29 towards the sea (Nieuwe Waterweg, 1872), and the city's new, industrial
30 vocation on the left bank of the river. Industrial settlements linked to
31 the harbour were created, factories for the manufacture of goods pro-
32 duced from the increasing masses of imported raw materials, including
33 refined oil products and chemicals, and, in the Feijenoord area, ship-
34 yards devoted to vessels built to serve the growing transatlantic and
35 Asian maritime traffic. The new industries provoked a mass immigra-
36 tion of workers who settled on the left bank in a completely new city
37 with its own physical characteristics and its own sense of identity.

38 In the great werkstad that Rotterdam had become within the Dutch
39 global economy, the left bank, called for short 'South' (*Zuid*), was a
40 double-dyed working district. Generally speaking, the urban outlay
41 on the left bank was much poorer; it was virtually destitute of public

1 facilities, with the exception of a few churches and social or health care
2 institutions, and remnants of former villages. The first global devel-
3 opment plan of this mostly privately constructed area was created in
4 1922. Since institutions of high culture remained reserved exclusively
5 to the north side of the city right up to the last decades of the twentieth
6 century, the south developed its own brand of popular culture with
7 a particular civic memory. Whereas native middle-class inhabitants
8 and, in the poorer quarters, dock-workers dominated on the right
9 bank, immigrant labourers – first Dutch, then foreign – did so on the
10 left bank. They favoured their own emblematic football team: Sparta
11 in the north, Feijenoord in the south, Excelsior for the middle classes
12 in the more well-to-do Eastern districts, especially Kralingen. Moreover,
13 the immigrants were predominantly either stern, orthodox Calvinists
14 from the Zeeland isles or the remote northern provinces, or Roman
15 Catholics from Brabant, as opposed to the rather liberal colour of old-
16 town Protestantism, with its strongly established Catholic, Remonstrant
17 (Arminian), Lutheran, Mennonite, and Jewish minorities and its host of
18 foreign seamen's churches.

20 Local history and globalization

22 The two halves of the city, approximately of equal size, have grown apart
23 in the city's civic memory, in spite of the city council's efforts to establish
24 bridges between them in urban space and urban culture. The south has
25 barely adopted the historical memory of the old town in the north, and
26 the north has largely ignored the memory and indeed the very exist-
27 ence of the south. In recent decades, however, new developments have
28 challenged this physical and cultural segregation: the decline of indus-
29 try and shipbuilding and the gradual move of the harbour downstream
30 towards the sea; the unifying efforts of the city council to relocate
31 cultural facilities, financial and judicial institutions, and administrative
32 offices in the south; but, above all, the influx of large numbers of immi-
33 grants from outside Europe into the urban space, constituting new eth-
34 nic communities all around the city. At present, 50 per cent (scheduled
35 to rise to 55 per cent by 2015) of the population of Rotterdam, repre-
36 senting 173 nationalities, consists of first- or second-generation immi-
37 grants from non-Western ethnic groups.¹³ In 2009 Rotterdam became the
38 first great European city to elect a mayor born in an Islamic community
39 outside Europe (Ahmed Aboutaleb, born in 1961 in Morocco).

40 These new population groups have changed radically the cultural and
41 religious landscape of the town, not only by the mass introduction of
Islamic culture and religion, including several huge mosques and an

Islamic university,¹⁴ but also by reinforcing Roman Catholicism as well as free evangelical movements through the influx of immigrants from Caribbean and African countries, particularly from former Portuguese colonies. Moreover, upward mobility has played a centrifugal role in the physical space. The late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century districts surrounding the city centre have progressively been abandoned by the original white population as they migrated to suburbs at or outside the municipality's borders and subjected to a process of gentrification. Moreover, they witnessed the construction of expensive apartment towers in the new city centre and on the prestigious renovated Wilhelmina Pier on the left bank. At present the older districts around the city centre are predominantly occupied by communities of foreign origin. This urban redistribution has huge consequences for the civic memory of the town. On the one hand, it may redress the former divisions, linking the right and the left banks in one common cultural space. On the other, once the native population has left the renewed city centre, its ancient civic memory is in danger of disappearing. The appropriation of the historical memory of the old town by its present-day population is hindered by the fact that they barely recognize it as their own, and that the physical space provides very few clues to aid such identification, other than the memory of wartime destruction and subsequent reconstruction.

Although the ever-growing harbour has slowly crept towards the North Sea and moved away from the city centre, employing, moreover, many fewer workers than in the times of manual labour, it remains Rotterdam's pride. The alderman in charge of the harbour of the 'World Port World City', as Rotterdam calls itself, is still the virtual master of the city's infrastructure and public space. The memory of the ocean steamers and of the thousands of poor Europeans coming every year from as far afield as Russia to migrate from Rotterdam to the promised land of America is one of the strongest nostalgic elements of the city's historical memory.¹⁵ The restored departure hall and the early twentieth-century office building (now the Hotel New York) of the Holland America Line are not only celebrated landmarks on the river but also much-visited places of memory for former emigrants. The annual 'World Harbour Days' in September, featuring a parade of giant ships, mercantile as well as naval, are still one of the most popular memorial events of the town.

May 1940: the catastrophe

Everything changed for Rotterdam on 14 May 1940.¹⁶ In the early afternoon of the fourth day after Germany had declared war on the Netherlands, a German air squadron carried out a bombing raid on

1 the city centre, intending to compel the local army forces to surrender,
2 but apparently starting the attack before the ultimatum for the town's
3 capitulation had expired, that is to say against the conventions of war-
4 fare. Right from the start things went wrong: the water supply for the
5 town's fire engines was destroyed by accident, and in spite of the prob-
6 ably limited objectives of the bombing operation, the whole city centre
7 almost immediately took fire. It proved impossible to save the densely
8 built centre of Rotterdam. Over a period of days, the fire took hold and
9 destroyed one street after another. Virtually every monument charged
10 with historical memory was destroyed: St Laurent's Church, the former
11 City Hall, the old Exchange, the municipal museum, all the historic
12 churches of the different Christian communities and the two Jewish
13 synagogues, the impressive rows of old and new merchant houses on
14 the Meuse embankment and the main canals. In all, 850 inhabitants
15 died, thousands were injured, 24,000 houses and 11,000 other buildings
16 were destroyed, and 80,000 people lost their homes and belongings. The
17 only buildings in the old centre that escaped the fire were those which
18 had recently been built on larger plots, isolated from the common
19 streets: the new City Hall, the central Post Office, and the Municipal
20 Library, the new Exchange, still under construction when the war broke
21 out, the so-called White House, one of the very first office towers in
22 Europe built in 1897–98, and some department stores and bank offices.

23 For our theme, the destruction of the city centre is crucial for three rea-
24 sons: physical, urban, and civic. Firstly, it was of the cause of a complete
25 change of the *physical* space, and generated a continual discussion on
26 urban policy in the following years. Secondly, the unending debate,
27 nourished by civic nostalgia, on the motives, causes, and intentionality
28 of the bombing has become one of the most vivid and durable elements
29 of the city's *urban* memory.¹⁷ Moreover, this discussion theme still ani-
30 mates a substantial proportion of the Rotterdam-born and Rotterdam-
31 bred inhabitants who, as firm believers in their ill fate, distinguish
32 themselves sharply from professional historians, 'impartial' observers,
33 and the bulk of the immigrant population. In their civic memory, the
34 'terror bombing' was the result of a conspiracy, or a deliberate attempt
35 at the total destruction of the city and its historical memory, and there
36 is no place whatsoever in their narrative for elements of accident or for
37 debate about German motives.¹⁸

38 39 **Victimization**

40 The key-word here is victimization. In the conscious dimension of
41 urban memory, Rotterdam shares its experience with a range of 'twin'

1 cities such as Coventry, Dresden, and Warsaw, whose hearts were wiped
2 out during the Second World War, as guiltless victims of massive bomb-
3 ing, sustained Blitz, or systematic destruction. Now including post-9/11
4 New York, these cities have long tended to consider themselves in their
5 urban discourse as 'innocent towns', immolated by a malevolent enemy
6 depicted in terms of sheer evil. Compressing their whole urban memory
7 of wartime into a single event produced by their nemesis, they have
8 obscured or deliberately 'forgotten' the bombings by friends, i.e. the
9 Allied forces. Feelings of sorrow and other elements of civic memory
10 have been almost exclusively redirected towards the disaster inflicted on
11 the city by the demonstrable, demonized enemy. The catastrophe thus
12 gradually became coextensive with the city's historical self-awareness,
13 expelling all those memories that might harm the sense of uniqueness
14 of the experience and the victimization of the city. The city's memory
15 turned in upon itself and its 'glocal' dimension increasingly became
16 merely local.

17 This self-sufficient urban memory was reinforced by the fact that
18 the ancient city centre of Rotterdam enjoyed neither a symbolic status
19 in the nation's history nor a reputation for urban beauty, as was the
20 case for Amsterdam, The Hague, or Utrecht. Therefore, the catastrophe
21 remained very much the subject of local emotions, an event which
22 the Dutch population outside Rotterdam felt only remotely concerned
23 with. Local and national memory interfered in the intellectual under-
24 standing of the event and its assimilation in national historiography,
25 but the reconstruction of Rotterdam's city centre never became a truly
26 national concern, either in discourse or in practice. In spite of the
27 celebratory discourse of Dutch architects, Rotterdam's new cityscape
28 remains more associated emotionally with foreign city planning and
29 transnational architecture than with Dutch urban typology.

31 Communicative memory and cultural memory

32
33 The third reason for the centrality of the city centre's destruction has to
34 do with its role in the *civic* memory of the town. Indeed, the catastrophe
35 has largely wiped out the city's centuries-long pre-war history, which
36 has been replaced by a short-term resilient history starting from the
37 fact of the destruction as a new beginning of the city's existence, quasi
38 *ab ovo*. This is not to say that the city's earlier history has disappeared
39 from urban self-consciousness, but for the elderly people who still feel
40 concerned by the city's pre-war history it has become an object of
41 incommensurable nostalgia, expressed, for instance, in the production

1 of endless series of picture albums with reproductions of postcards
2 from the lost city, and in local exhibitions. Most popular are the visual
3 enigmas asking identification of a vanished cityscape that are regularly
4 presented to the readers in local newspapers. They invariably provoke a
5 long series of enthusiastic and committed reactions.¹⁹ Virtually all the
6 comments concern either the former civic use of the city's space or the
7 cultural practices of its inhabitants, revealing how strongly the physical
8 appropriation of the ancient city has marked the identification of the
9 readers with the town's civic memory and how much of the ancient
10 civic memory survives only in a nostalgic form of urban anamnesis.²⁰
11 The rebuilt city has become a landscape of virtual memory for the
12 native population recalling its lost liveliness and supposed splendour.²¹

13 In fact, during the slowly expanding fire many historical objects were
14 able to be saved. In addition, fortunately, the municipal archives were
15 located in a nineteenth-century area outside the bombing perimeter.
16 Hence, local historical societies continue to flourish and a range of muse-
17 ums can display the town's pre-war history.²² Whereas in the urban space
18 the perception of the continuity of local history is still safe, in the civic
19 space, that of the personal appropriation of the town's memory, there is a
20 *before* and an *after*. The *before* is only recognized, and often charged with
21 nostalgia, by those who either by personal experience or by shared trans-
22 mission remember the pre-1940 past. The *after*-1940, however, dominates
23 public perception of the city's history. May 1940 is its true limit and barrier.

24 We may use here the distinction proposed by Jan Assmann between
25 the individually transmitted, informal and embodied *communicative*
26 memory of the three- or four-generation chain of living experience, and
27 the solidified, institutionalized and ritualized mediated *cultural* memory
28 of those who no longer have a personal link with the perception of the
29 past.²³ According to such analytical categories, the city's pre-war history
30 is slowly sliding down into a phase of cultural memory that lacks the
31 critical incentive of the committed witness. Moreover, in the now well
32 established diversity of the civic memories of multi-ethnic Rotterdam
33 there is barely any place for historical appropriation of that cultur-
34 ally distant and physically invisible past, wiped out from any form of
35 everyday perception. In Rotterdam more than anywhere else in the
36 Netherlands, the pre-1940 past has become 'a foreign country'.

37

38 Trauma and commemoration

39

40 If the destruction of the city centre really made 1940 a watershed in
41 the history of the city's physical, urban and civic space, that was due

less to the bombing itself than to the subsequent fire that destroyed most of the historical centre, and to the decisions taken by the city administration with regard to reconstruction.²⁴ Since the reconstruction period imposed a new beginning on Rotterdam, its physical consequences have been comparable in significance to those of the Golden Age for Amsterdam. Rotterdam's self-understanding is now closely knit to its own destruction and reconstruction. In 1948 the city's coat of arms was given a new motto: '*Sterker door strijd*' – 'Stronger by struggle', referring to what the town had gone through during the war. In fact, civic memory has focused much more on destruction than on survival.

The most sensitive of the sixty commemorative war monuments of Rotterdam, and probably the only *lieu de mémoire* of wartime that is shared by everybody, is not the official monument 'Resurgent Rotterdam' (*Herrijzend Rotterdam*) located in front of the City Hall, made in 1957 by the Dutch sculptor Mari S. Andriessen (1897–1979) and representing the resurrection of the town through the citizens' resistance to the oppressor. Rather, it is the statue designed by the Russian sculptor Ossip Zadkine (1890–1967) on the instruction of the department store De Bijenkorf that had partly survived the destructions and wanted to honour its many Jewish employees who had fallen victim to the war and the holocaust. Andriessen's monument is the site of official commemorations and remains linked to mass manifestations honouring resistance to injustice of whatever kind. It is the war monument of the urban memory, the object of formal commemoration and other urban rituals.

Zadkine's statue, in contrast, is the civic object of pride and sorrow, a place where mourning is permitted, and where trauma, nostalgia and emotion can express itself freely, eventually even against the official discourse on the war. Conceived by Zadkine himself in 1947 during a quick passage through still-ruined Rotterdam, designed in 1949 and unveiled in 1953 after a heated debate on its symbolism, it represents 'The Destroyed City' in the form of a distressed man deprived of his heart and with his hands thrown in the air in sheer despair. In spite of ongoing discussions on what it represents and where it is best placed, it has conquered the town's civic memory and is endowed with near-sacred status in the perception of those who remember the war as a meaningful episode in the history of the city. Affectionately called '*Jan Gat*' – 'John Hole' or '*Jan met de Handjes*' – 'John Little-Hands' by the local population, it is the subject of urban legends, just like the other iconic statue in the town, that of its most famous native, Erasmus. Its maker, Zadkine, has been adopted as a citizen of the Rotterdam, lending his name to educational institutions and private companies.

Only recently has civic memory managed to diversify its scope, to direct its attention towards other elements of the city's history, and to get over the all-empowering war trauma focused on the city's victimization. New attention is now given to the many other bombings of the city, those of virtually all harbour equipment by the German invaders, and those of peripheral districts by the Allied forces, such as the 'forgotten bombing' of 31 March 1943 that destroyed in error a whole quarter of the Delfshaven district and caused more than 400 deaths.²⁵ Allied Forces attacked the city 128 times causing 884 deaths – as many as the May 1940 bombing. The diversification of the war trauma is proof of the gradual rise of a more balanced cultural memory beyond the extremes of hitherto predominant communicative memory, and of the victory of the civic dimension in urban memory.

Appropriations of the urban space

The destruction of physical space is vital for civic memory because it involves not only a terrible wartime episode, but also a strong element of urban memory. In fact, after the May 1940 bombing many buildings could have been saved or restored, but the destruction wrought by the German invader chimed with pre-war ideas about urban planning. As early as 1930, city architect Willem G. Witteveen (1891–1979) had been charged with planning improvements to the accessibility of the city centre, creating some major routes through the built-up area and more open space, and assuring a more fluid circulation. Several measures to relieve congestion in the city centre were initiated before the war, including the first tunnel under the river Meuse (1937–1942), part of a new major thoroughfare laid down at some distance from the old town. The construction of the new City Hall, the Post Office and the new Exchange along the Coolensingel, a former rampart converted into the main city boulevard, with department stores, cinemas and bank offices, had already eliminated a large number of small insalubrious alleys and inaugurated the gradual shift of the city's core towards the nineteenth-century extension on the west side of the old centre. The Coolensingel had become the central thoroughfare of the town and the location of its most prestigious buildings.

On 18 May 1940, four days after the bombing, while the city still burned, Witteveen was charged with the reconstruction. He intended to create a modern business centre with only limited housing potential, but his architectural preferences were rather traditional. In 1941 he proposed a compromise solution, respecting most of the old city grid but

1 permitting at the same time a rationalization of its physiognomy and
2 building characteristics, and a redistribution of the city centre's urban
3 functions. Parkways had to bring nature into the built area.

4 Others, however, were tempted by a *tabula rasa* policy. Although it
5 was incompatible with the maintenance of a vigorous civic memory,
6 the wiping-clean approach nevertheless seduced two parties concerned
7 with the city's fate. There were the dreams of grandeur by the members
8 of the so-called 'Club Rotterdam', a group of influential citizens, mostly
9 industrial entrepreneurs and merchants personally concerned about
10 the future of the city, several of them being also touched by the loss of
11 their properties. The club was presided by Cees H. van der Leeuw (1890–
12 1973), a theosophist and holistic thinker, and the ambitious director of
13 the Van Nelle coffee, tea and tobacco factory, whose office and factory
14 building built in 1925–1931 by Brinkman & Van der Vlugt is a master-
15 piece of modernist architecture. For van der Leeuw and his fellow club
16 members total modernization was the way a renewed and expanding
17 Rotterdam of global importance and worldwide influence had to go.

18 The Club was vehemently opposed to a historicizing reconstruc-
19 tion of the city in neo-gothic, neo-renaissance or neo-whatever style.
20 In fact, during and after the war four different models were applied to
21 the reconstruction of the destroyed Dutch cities. A historicizing, even
22 nostalgic reconstruction in supposedly regional style marks Middelburg
23 in Zeeland, where the ideology of the Delft school of architecture and
24 urbanism has been applied; traditionalist repairs of damaged town
25 neighbourhoods, conserving at least the old cityscape and the street
26 grid have been carried out in Venlo and Tiel; modernist repair charac-
27 terizes Arnhem, Nijmegen and Eindhoven; and *tabula rasa*, the most
28 radical solution, applies in Rotterdam.²⁶ In spite of local appeals in
29 favour of the Delft school ideology, the Club Rotterdam rejected any
30 form of nostalgia or provincialism. It looked forward to a reconstruction
31 using Manhattan's rational grid and aspired at the redevelopment of
32 Rotterdam as a metropolis similar to its trans-Atlantic twin city.

33 The importance of the American connection cannot be overempha-
34 sized. The United States of America was not only a long-standing com-
35 mercial partner of many Rotterdam companies, and the country to
36 which the emigrants departing from Rotterdam were headed, but also
37 provided the mental map for the city's future. In its campaign to over-
38 rule city architect Witteveen, the club found an ally in a second party –
39 government officials at The Hague (by then controlled by the Nazis)
40 who advanced arguments of efficiency, money and time. They pleaded
41 in favour of a completely new city marked by another kind of grandeur,

1 inspired by Hitler's and Albert Speer's architectural taste. Against the
2 explicit desire of the Rotterdam council that intended to preserve 144
3 of the damaged buildings, including the old city grid, the national
4 government decided, therefore, to clear as soon as possible the whole
5 central area touched by the bombs and the fire, destroying buildings
6 that had survived or were restorable, and including even the buildings'
7 foundations in the cleansing operation. Several of the many canals of
8 the town were filled in with the debris, and a huge artificial ski slope
9 outside the town constitutes another remnant of the past ignored by
10 its users. Only two historic buildings escaped final destruction: the
11 late medieval St Laurent's Church, and the baroque Schielandshuis
12 built in 1662–1665 for the regional Water Board. A third building that
13 was intended to be saved, the monumental Delftse Poort, a 1764 neo-
14 classical city gate that was in the process of relocation when the bombs
15 fell, was finally sacrificed. On 18 May 1995, the fiftieth anniversary of
16 the start of the city's reconstruction, a steel replica of the gate designed
17 by Cor Kraat (*1946) and incorporating some of its surviving remnants
18 was inaugurated on a nearby location as a nostalgic place of memory
19 of the old town.

21 Urban space and civic memory

23 During the war, reconstruction of the city proved impossible for mate-
24 rial reasons. In the years 1944–1946 Van der Leeuw became a delegate
25 to the post-war Dutch government for the reconstruction of Rotterdam,
26 which assured him of considerable influence on the process. The delay
27 permitted in 1946 the elaboration of a new *Basisplan* by town architect
28 Cornelis van Traa (1899–1970), who had taken over from Witteveen's
29 in 1944.²⁷ It ran counter to Witteveen's idea of a harmonious cityscape
30 but, in a spirit of perfectibility (*maakbaarheid*), insisted on modernity
31 without totally sacrificing the reminiscences of the physical past in the
32 new urban outlay. The result was a hybrid city map: broad thorough-
33 fares bearing the name of former small alleys recalled lost buildings or
34 urban functions without showing them physically, and the Grote Markt
35 became a huge parking lot. The market was relocated, but recovered its
36 former position in a huge Market Hall inaugurated in October 2014.

37 Van Traa's *Basisplan* certainly led to the realization of a new city-
38 scape. Unrecognisable to the urban memory of past generations, it
39 has prevented the appropriation of civic memory as a continuum
40 between pre-war and post-war Rotterdam. Deprived of any form of
41 global evidence of the physical past, civic memory now attaches itself

1 emotionally to spurious relics retrieved every now and then, almost at
 2 random, such as the remnant of a medieval city wall suspended in the
 3 Blaak subway station. Strong opposition by the local population in the
 4 1990s prevented the removal of the last pre-war bridge on the Meuse,
 5 called the 'Hef' (the Lift-bridge), a 1878-built cast-iron construction
 6 charged with the nostalgia of the industrial phase of the city's past,
 7 and the most popular symbolic link between the right and the left
 8 bank. Similarly, after the removal of the nineteenth-century elevated
 9 railway through the city centre in the early 1990s, which met with a
 10 huge resistance from the population as well as from urban planners,
 11 the other urban elevated railway (the initial part of the Hofpleinlijn)
 12 has been saved and will be repurposed for civic use. The city authori-
 13 ties have finally rewarded the nostalgic memory of the vanished town
 14 with a virtual memory performance designed by architect Adriaan
 15 Geuze (*1960).²⁸ The boundaries of the great fire of May 1940, called
 16 the *Brandgrens*, still perceptible in the built environment for a keen
 17 observer, have been enhanced by a nightly son et lumière projection,
 18 a 30-stage audio tour, and a series of LED-armatures sunk into the
 19 pavement and marking the *Brandgrens* (Figure 2.1)



Figure 2.1 Projection in 2007 of the Rotterdam 'Brandgrens' of 1940, commis-
 sioned by Rotterdam Festivals and conceived by Mothership, Rotterdam (photo
 by Bas Czerwinski)

Reconstruction

Meanwhile, the reconstruction of the physical environment of the city centre after the war has created its own urban and civic memory. As early as 1947, when the city started to be rebuilt, 18 May was proclaimed Construction Day (*Opbouwdag*), renamed Reconstruction Day (*Wederopbouwdag*) in 1950, to commemorate the new beginning of the town's urban history and revive civic spirit. The major buildings of the first post-war reconstruction campaign have become physical landmarks in their own right, replacing and eliminating the memory of the pre-war built area, such as the Blijdorp Zoo and the Central Railway Station (1957, demolished in 2007), both by architect Van Ravesteyn, with the adjoining Post Office by the brothers Kraaijvanger (1959) and the Groot Handelsgebouw by Maaskant. With 110,000 square metres of useful surface for offices and showrooms, this was initially Europe's biggest shared office building, USA-inspired, conceived as early as 1944 and opened in 1951. The post-war city is now distinguished by several huge bank office buildings also designed by Kraaijvanger Architects along the Coolsingel, the Blaak and the Schiekade (former canals filled in with the city's 1940 ruins), department stores such as Vroom & Dreesmann by Kraaijvanger in 1950, Ter Meulen by Van den Broek & Bakema, 1951, and De Bijenkorf by Marcel Breuer, 1957, with the monumental, abstract, but highly popular sculpture by Naum Gabo in front of the store, facing the preserved new Exchange, office buildings such as Shell, 1960, and in particular the Lijnbaan shopping mall, the first pedestrian shopping centre in Europe, jointly designed by Van den Broek & Bakema and opened in 1953 parallel to the Coolsingel thoroughfare. Outside the city centre, harbour facilities play a similar role, not to speak of new town districts, such as Pendrecht on the left bank, conceived in the early 1950s with housing conditions which were then of a revolutionary novelty, now notorious as a pauperized problem area.

Under pressure from concerned citizens and local organizations for the preservation of post-war achievements, most of the great reconstruction-era buildings are now acquiring heritage status. They are preserved and remembered as material testimonies to the early days of the new, second history of the city. The Lijnbaan, in particular, continues to play the role of the emotional, physically embodied heart of the city's new civic memory. It is appropriated over and over again by citizens and users of the town in the often irregular, unconscious and uncontrolled ways that Michel de Certeau has characterized as citizens' tactics, as opposed to the city authorities' strategy. Every attempt to change its

1 physiognomy or to modernize its appearance provokes an upsurge of
2 resistance to the urban authorities and the city planners. Yet, the city
3 keeps changing. New idiom emerges for its urban identity and civic
4 memory. Present-day Rotterdam has evolved from a post-war industrial
5 city into a post-industrial phase, the ever-growing harbour moving away
6 and becoming invisible to the general population. The harsh, masculine,
7 twentieth-century working town ideology is being replaced by a sexier,
8 feminized image of the 'city lounge', subject to 'gentrification', codified
9 in the *Binnenstadsplan 2008–2030*.²⁹

11 Old and new civic narratives

13 At present, the diversity of problems – discontinuity of physical space,
14 huge changes in urban space, and the varieties of city experience in the
15 civic space – constitutes a tremendous challenge for the unity of the
16 city's memory. In Rotterdam, local memory seems deemed to remain
17 a fragmented group memory: disparate elements include the new civic
18 memory of ethnic immigrants, the urban memory of privileged social
19 groups, and the historical memory of the town restricted to the few
20 still-cohesive areas. Paradoxically, the city's centre itself is ~~now~~ the less
21 historicized than at any previous time in civic memory. Through heavy
22 deployment of city-marketing the cultural experts and the cultural
23 elite, the 'creative classes' of Rotterdam, are trying to achieve the rep-
24 resentation of the city, especially its new centre, as a true metropolis.³⁰
25 Although the image of Rotterdam as 'Manhattan on the Meuse' still
26 holds as part of its citizens' pride, other, more convivial, images of the
27 city are constantly being thrown up.

28 The physical discontinuity in the city's built area was addressed by
29 Orhan Kaya (*1973), a former Alderman responsible for participation
30 and culture (2006–2008), and himself of Turkish origin. In a public state-
31 ment he reflected on the character of Rotterdam's real monuments for
32 the future: instead of long-vanished buildings, such memories should
33 be the narratives cherished by the members of the different ethnic
34 groups, including the original Dutch population itself. For him, the pre-
35 1940 history of the city – which he never experienced in person – is a
36 world that has been irredeemably lost because of the disappearance of
37 its physical evidence. This makes it virtually impossible for newcomers
38 to appropriate its features, its functions and its meaning. Yet, in his view
39 the narratives constructed by the various communities around the few
40 surviving monuments of the past, such as multifunctional St Laurent's
41 Church, Erasmus's statue, the City Hall and the Holland America Line

1 offices must be able in the future to unite the city's inhabitants in a
2 shared, but richly diverse historical memory.³¹

3 Actually, some of those narratives underpin the genesis of a new civic
4 memory. One of the strongest elements, acceptable to all population
5 groups without exception, old and new, is the narrative of Rotterdam
6 as a city of toleration or, in the present-day ethnicized idiom, of mutual
7 'respect'. In fact, the most important advocates of toleration in the
8 Golden Age, during which the Dutch Republic became the European
9 paragon of that civic virtue, are closely linked to the history of Rotterdam
10 and its urban memory. This was personified in the life and work of two of
11 the city's great attorneys, Hugo Grotius (1583–1645), the founder of inter-
12 national maritime law, and Joan van Oldenbarnevelt (1547–1619), the
13 founder of the East India Company. Both are remembered as forebears of
14 liberal thinking, and traditional Dutch tolerance. Their memory, and the
15 city's reputation, attracted many refugees to Rotterdam, among whom are
16 numbered John Locke (1632–1704) and Pierre Bayle (1647–1706), authors
17 of the first mature theoretical treatises on religious and civic toleration.³²

18 19 **Rotterdam's icon of toleration: Erasmus**

20
21 A remarkable comeback in that field is that of the city's most famous
22 son, Desiderius Erasmus (1466/69–1536).³³ In a public poll of October
23 2009, Erasmus has been elected Rotterdam's 'greatest inhabitant ever'
24 with 56 per cent of the votes, before the immensely popular, legend-
25 ary boxing hero Bep van Klaveren (1907–1992) who like Erasmus has
26 been awarded with a popular statue, but in a district outside the city
27 centre.³⁴ Immediately after Erasmus's death his birth-place became the
28 object of veneration by his international admirers. As early as 1549 the
29 city council erected a statue of Erasmus in the market square – probably
30 the first statue of a secular person erected north of the Alps. In 1622, it
31 was replaced by a bronze statue of the scholar reading a book, designed
32 by Hendrick de Keyser (1565–1621), which still stands in front of
33 St Laurent's Church. Having survived all the wars, it has attracted some
34 urban legends, the oldest, dating from the seventeenth century, being
35 that Erasmus will turn a page of his open book as soon as he hears the
36 church bells striking midnight.³⁵

37 Erasmus became the totem of Rotterdam, its icon and the secular
38 saint embodying the values of toleration, moderation and learning that
39 the town's elite stood for. The local university, the main bridge, several
40 streets, subway and railway lines, and many societies and companies
41 bear his name. The municipality actively promotes his reputation as

the typical representative of the city's spirit. Quite recently Erasmus has proved to be fit for the challenge of religious and ethnic diversity. In 2008, a joint picture of two Christian and Muslim champions of toleration, Erasmus and Rumi (or Mevlana, 1207–1273), was painted on the outer wall of a Rotterdam mosque. And the first tattooed Erasmus-addict has already been spotted on the streets of Rotterdam.

New global civic rituals

The cultural diversity of present-day globalized Rotterdam has instilled new rituals in the civic memory, such as the already traditional Summer Carnival of the Caribbean and Cape-Verdian population, organized for the first time in 1984, the Dunya Festivals, or Poetry International. The Summer Carnival unites the Southern and Northern halves of the city in a unique parade. Neglecting the traditional pre-war urban memory, it adopts as its natural environment the newly coloured multi-ethnic districts of the nineteenth-century town, enabling the formation of a new global civic memory. Many other shifts in urban practices, rituals and memory may be mentioned related to the changing composition of Rotterdam's population, its distribution over the city area, and the interplay between the city's top-down policy and bottom-up popular initiatives. By memorializing in a 2011 exhibition the many urban rituals of the city, Rotterdam Museum has ~~time-fostred~~ their participation.

One of the most exciting initiatives to enhance the continuity of civic memory aims at the personal appropriation of the city's history by its youth.³⁶ Rotterdam Museum's Panorama Project, started in 2007, organized an exhibition of 300 photographs in 2011 showing young school-children from ten town districts. Drawn from all the city's ethnic groups, each of them exhibited a personal or family object related to former times in Rotterdam. One boy showed a picture of his grandfather's delivery service, another exhibited a pre-war map of the city in homage to his grandparents, a girl displayed relics of her religious experience. All 300 children were visibly proud to expose their intimate relations with the recent or historic past. In the future they may well come to embody the global civic memory of a once more undivided town, proud of its urban history.

Notes

1. For the city as a privileged *lieu de mémoire* in the Netherlands, Frijhoff, 1993, 'La ville: lieu de mémoire de l'Europe moderne?'; van Vree, 2008, 'Locale geschiedenis'.

- 1 2. For the theoretical background: Frijhoff, 1989, 'De stad en haar geheugen';
- 2 Erll and Nünning (eds.), 2008, *Cultural Memory Studies*; Assmann, 1999,
- 3 *Erinnerungsräume*; Tilmans, van Vree and Winter (eds.), 2010, *Performing the*
- 4 *Past*, pp. 35–50.
- 5 3. de Certeau, 1984, *The Practice of Everyday Life*.
- 6 4. On the changing relation between the physical space of the city and the
- 7 harbour: Meyer, 1996, *De stad en de haven*.
- 8 5. This contribution focuses on the city as a whole, not on the community
- 9 memories of particular groups or urban districts. On the history of Rotterdam:
- 10 van der Schoor, 1999, *Stad in aanwas*; van de Laar, 2000, *Stad van formaat*.
- 11 *Geschiedenis van Rotterdam in de negentiende en twintigste eeuw*; van de Laar
- 12 and van Jaarsveld, 2000, *Historical Atlas of Rotterdam*. For the urban and civic
- 13 memory of ancient and new Rotterdam: Frijhoff, 1989, 'Rotterdam herkend';
- 14 Frijhoff, 1993, 'Beelden, verhalen, daden: stadscultuur'.
- 15 6. van de Laar, 1998, *Veranderingen in het geschiedbeeld*.
- 16 7. de Klerk, 1998, *Particuliere plannen*.
- 17 8. ter Molen (ed.), *150 jaar Museum Boijmans van Beuningen*; van Wijnen, 2004,
- 18 *D.G. van Beuningen*.
- 19 9. On the *werkstad* concept: Van de Laar, 2000, *Stad van formaat*, p. 301.
- 20 10. Van de Laar, 2000, *Stad van formaat*, p. 393.
- 21 11. Dutilleux and van der Voo, 1844, *Physiologie van Rotterdam*. On this work:
- 22 van Ravesteyn, 1942, *Rotterdamsche cultuur vóór honderd jaar*; Rogier, 1948,
- 23 *Rotterdam tegen het midden van de negentiende eeuw*.
- 24 12. Cf. the richly illustrated volume by Halbertsma and van Ulzen (eds.), 2001,
- 25 *Interbellum Rotterdam*.
- 26 13. Cf. Engbersen, Snel and Weltevrede, 2005, *Sociale herovering in Amsterdam en*
- 27 *Rotterdam*, pp. 26–28.
- 28 14. The Mevlana Mosque in the northern part of the city matches the Essalam
- 29 Mosque in the southern part, near the Feijenoord stadium. ~~The latter, under~~
- 30 ~~construction, is scheduled to be the biggest mosque in Western Europe.~~
- 31 15. Zevenbergen, 1990, *Toen zij uit Rotterdam vertrokken*.
- 32 16. For a detailed analysis see the monumental synthesis by van der Pauw, 2006,
- 33 *Rotterdam in de Tweede Wereldoorlog*.
- 34 17. Transcripts of emotionally charged testimonies about the catastrophe by
- 35 eye-witnesses, recorded in 1968–1969, are conserved in the Municipal
- 36 Archives of Rotterdam. A selection has been published by Wagenaar, 1970
- 37 [2008], *Rotterdam mei '40*. Testimonies from German eye-witnesses: Holl,
- 38 1998, *Die Tragödie von Rotterdam*.
- 39 18. Protagonists of the thesis of intentional destruction or terror bombing are:
- 40 Elfferich, 1983, *Eindelijk de waarheid nabij*; Elfferich, 1990, *Rotterdam werd*
- 41 *verraden*; Hasselton, 1999, *Het bombardement van Rotterdam*.
19. For instance, the 'Waar was dat nou?' ['Where was this?'] feature in the widely
- read semi-monthly newspaper for elderly citizens *De Oud-Rotterdammer*.
- See also the civic memory of everyday life in pre-war Rotterdam by van
- Geldermalsen, 2002, *Toen zij naar Rotterdam vertrokken*, and the website
- www.ditisrotjeknor.nl (accessed 11 October 2014), with links to other
- sites with pre-war photos or nostalgic memories. Rotjeknor is the popular
- nickname of Rotterdam in the realm of civic memory.
20. See for other examples of popular civic memory the very first collection
- going back to 1940: Hazelzet, 1947, *Rotterdam zoals wij het kenden*.

21. On a local level, this concurs with some of the perspectives developed by Gerson, 2003, *The Pride of Place*.
22. 'Roterodamum', the historical society founded in 1947 to cover the historical trajectory of the city, counted 2,700 contributing members in November 2009. Its yearbook goes back to 1888.
23. Jan Assmann, 2008, 'Communicative and cultural memory'.
24. Roelofsz, 1989, *De frustratie van een droom*; Wagenaar, 1993, *Welvaartsstad in wording*.
25. A similar evolution has taken place at Nijmegen, where the disastrous and murderous 'bombing by mistake' by the Allied Forces of 22 February, 1944, causing 500 deaths but long virtually concealed from public discourse, has recently been reincorporated into the canon of urban history. See J. Rosendaal, 2009, *Nijmegen '44*. As in the case of the 'terror bombing' thesis at Rotterdam, this event has also been the object of a conspiracy hypothesis; cf. Brinkhuis, 1984, *De fatale aanval*.
26. Bosma and Wagenaar (eds.), 1995, *Een geruisloze doorbraak*. On Middelburg: van Gent and Sijnke, 2010, *Middelburg 17 mei 1940*.
27. van Traa, 1946, *Het nieuwe hart van Rotterdam*; Couperus, 'The Invisible Reconstruction'.
28. *Rotterdam: De brandgrens van 14 mei 1940*, 2007. See also the comparison of pre-war and post-war images of Rotterdam along the Fire Boundary by van de Laar and Hage (eds.), 2010, *Brandgrens Rotterdam*.
29. On the post-war change of the city's image from commercial to working city, and after 1970 to a modern city of culture: van de Laar, 2007, 'Het beeld van Rotterdam'. Similarly: van den Berg, 2012, 'Femininity as a city marketing strategy'; Willem Schinkel, 2012, *Het geheugenverlies van Rotterdam*.
30. van Ulzen, 2007, *Dromen van een metropool*.
31. http://www.rotterdam.nl/wonen_en_leven (accessed 22 October 2014).
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33. Visser-Isles, 1993, *Erasmus and Rotterdam*; van Ruler and Verbrugh (eds.), 2008, *Desiderius Erasmus*. For the conservation of Erasmus's memory in Rotterdam: <http://www.erasmushuisrotterdam.nl> accessed 11 October 2014; Frijhoff, 1998, *Heiligen, idolen, iconen*, pp. 60–63.
34. <http://www.nu.nl/algemeen/2103323/erasmus-grootste-rotterdammer.html> accessed 11 October 2014.
35. Elfferich (ed.), 1986, *Astie de klok hoort slaan*, p. 85.
36. *Panorama Rotterdam: 300 kinderen, 10 wijken, 1 stad* (Rotterdam, Museum Rotterdam, 2011).

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