

Again I am here with you. We are all here to let you see that we see you. We hear what you say but more than anything we see what you do. Citizens make choices based on this.

I dearly wish I could be here with you today in person, to speak to you once again, and this time to ask you, the BWB and the wethouder, how you intend to build a better Rotterdam for citizens who are not included in the vision.

Why am I back? Why me? I live on Fazantstraat in the Vogelbuurt. We have already saved our block from demolition, so why should I care? Why? Because I live in a city, a community of citizens. And my community obligation is not merely a question of my own personal interest. If we do not stand together as a community, all of us, you included – you especially – then we are nothing. And that is the thinking that should prevail. Your job is by definition to serve and stand with the communities you claim to represent.

To state the obvious, we have a severe housing crisis in Rotterdam. So the suggested answer to this problem then ... is to decrease the amount of available housing? This is exactly what was proposed at Fazantstraat, where I live. The proposal was to demolish most of the existing housing, largely in very good condition, in order to build a considerably smaller number of larger residences. Other plans around the city follow a similar template, to wit, Tweebosbuurt.

Among the points the city tried to make was the idea of diversifying our neighborhood. One walk through our area would be enough to show just how disingenuous that idea was. I have not so far heard of any plans to diversify the wealthy, less polychromatic areas of the city. Have you? In those neighborhoods, is there a plan to bring in more people of various nationalities, lifestyles and income levels? It is interesting to note in fact that the city plans for diversification seemed aimed at the neighborhoods that are already the most diverse in the city.

The stated goal is the improvement of the average income and education level in these areas considered underprivileged. Really? It seems obvious that if you merely move in people with higher incomes and levels of education, that will indeed happen. A simple cut and paste. The numbers will look nice and shiny. But what it will also do is disenfranchise and discard an entire

vital segment of the population, thereby destroying the fabric of the very communities you purport to improve. Where will those residents go? You will have done nothing to solve any problem. You will have merely pushed those people farther away from the city where handily, they will create less discomfort for the privileged – at an enormous cost to their own comfort, to their livelihoods, to their physical and mental well-being, and to the health and indeed the diversity, of the city itself. This, without mentioning the massive environmental cost, not a detail in these times. A shamefully lazy solution. No vision at all.

On top of it all, these plans are made right over the heads of the people they affect, without consulting them. What outrageous arrogance. What kind of democracy is that?

Need we further discuss how this happened in the Vogelbuurt? In the middle of the current pandemic, we were simply informed of the demolition of our homes. By letter. In the mailbox. There was not one word spoken to us, not one knock at the door, not one phone call, not even an email. What do you think of that? Does that seem fine? Is that the approach of a city which values its citizens?

While you consider the decisions you are empowered to take, I would like you to stop for a moment – right now – and imagine yourself in the position that large numbers of your own fellow citizens find themselves in, already confronted with a difficult life situation, when they are told they will have to move from their own homes in order to make room for better-appointed homes to be occupied by better-heeled people, who more closely fit the profile of some imagined ideal resident. How might you feel? How might you perceive the way your city regards you as a citizen? How would it feel losing your home, missing contact with neighbors, living away from friends and family? Luckily for you, you probably don't have to think of those things. It is very unlikely that you will be the ones who will suffer the literal and figurative wrecking ball of those decisions and policies.

Woonvisie has gone blind and badly needs to recover its vision, and not just on Fazantstraat and the Vogelbuurt. It needs to be entirely revised. Housing in Rotterdam is in already desperately short supply and the current policy reduces it even further. Madness.

For anyone with eyes to see, it is apparent that this situation is coming to a head. Just look around you. I would urge those of you responsible for these decisions to go and meet people, those people who are affected or may be affected by these demolitions and other projects in which entire populations are shuffled around like nothing better than pieces on a game board. Go meet those people. But don't just speak to them. Listen to them. Really listen. With humility. Listen to their stories. And make a concerted effort to put yourselves in their place. That is called empathy, the absence of which was once famously described as the definition of evil.

That this problem is becoming rapidly greater and more publicly sensitive is made clear by the emergence of organizations like Recht op de Stad, committed to dealing with this issue on an overall level. It becomes even more apparent how salient the problem is when the United Nations reports critically on Rotterdam's housing policy. This is not a question of PR or of image, but of humanity, and for that matter, common sense.

We know who supported us in the Vogelbuurt. We know who supported us from the beginning, and we know who we had to practically beg for that support. It is not nearly enough to utter nice words in a sotto voce. If you espouse values like democracy and environmental thinking and the worth of a citizen's work, but are not seen as manifesting those values in your own actions, then this is the time to rise to the occasion. In the strongest of possible terms, I urge you, dear decision makers, to use your influence in order to work for a better Rotterdam, not tear down its communities. Have some real vision. One which includes all of your fellow citizens here in the great city of Rotterdam.

Thank you for listening.

(Philippe Lavoipierre/27 Okt 2021)