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Building Democracy Anew: Neighborhood Planning and Political Reform in Post-Blitz Rotterdam

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Abstract

This article interrogates the political semantics of neighborhood planning during and after the Second World War. It argues that as much as a geographical substrate for social and spatial planning, the neighborhood was an organizing principle in agendas of urban political reform in the 1940s and 1950s. Taking the case of Rotterdam, a severely bombed city that suffered from warfare in many respects, this article discloses the languages of political reform that informed an agenda of revitalizing urban democracy within the framework of the neighborhood. Two intertwined trajectories, encompassing public and private initiatives to institutionalize modes of neighborhood politics and democracy, will show how notions of democratic citizenship and the post-war institutional design of urban governance became irreconcilable in Rotterdam, but had a lasting impact on twentieth-century urbanism.

Keywords

community, neighborhood unit, urban governance, post-war democracy, Rotterdam

Introduction

This article argues that neighborhood planning, as a quintessential part of post–Second World War urban reform, discloses an avenue of reform at the urban level, which contributed—discur-sively as well as institutionally—to the re-instatement of democracy at large in Western Europe. Alongside, and intertwined with, the sociospatial agendas of decentralized urban planning of the mid-twentieth century, the notion of the “neighborhood unit,” too, fostered—and was partly con-stituted by—thorough reconfiguration and re-conceptualization of the local body politic and the urban polity. The neighborhood unit, thus, did not only render a host of social and cultural institu-tions in urban life, but also incited and embodied a related (perceived) regeneration of urban poli-tics and democracy. Consequently, this article does not mark the well-known tenets of the planned neighborhood such as schools, churches, community centers, community work, playgrounds, social work, green space, shops, or standardized dwellings, but rather denotes the decentraliza-tion of democracy and governance within the post-war city.¹

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The realm of architecture and town planning has been one of the most prominent themes of neighborhood research in historiography. Much attention in the historical and sociological literature is devoted to the spatial and social planning (some even argue social engineering) aspects of the neighborhood and its origins in modern planning history.² Readings of the neighborhood unit tend to amount to interpretations revolving around decentralized sociospatial planning with the explicit aim to restore alleged fading community ties within the urban fabric. The upsurge of neighborhood planning is then interpreted as an expression of the top-down promotion of middle-class life—with the underlying aspiration of social homogeneity—and an attempt to mitigate class differences and conflict.³

This article, in addition and in contrast, presents a narrative that engages with what one could dub political engineering, “the conscious design of political institutions to achieve certain specified objects,” which, too, has to be associated with neighborhood-planning practices during the mid-twentieth century.⁴ During and particularly after the Second World War, western European cities—blitzed cities in particular—engaged in debates about how to include the citizenry in the vast projects of urban (re)development. As recent studies have demonstrated, many modalities of popular participation existed ranging from to institutionalized consultation, to ad hoc instances of popular hearings or inquiries with regard to post-war urban affairs.⁵ These instances of citizen–government contact alluded to a generic post-war discourse that stressed the necessity of democratic re-awakening and the political re-activation of the citizen.⁶

This intense interest in the regeneration of urban democracy and citizenship coincided with the upsurge of neighborhood unit thought. Whether related to new settlements, such as the new towns in Britain, or to (planned) (sub)urban extensions, which occurred in almost all urban contexts after the Second World War, the neighborhood was conceived as the sociospatial entity from which post-war urban life had to proceed.⁷ Conceptions of neighborhood planning adhered to the alleged natural human bonds, which were still present in their very essence, but which needed to be reinvigorated at neighborhood level.

One predominant discourse on the post-war renewal of democracy in urban life stemmed from the inter-war conceptions of popular democracy in American pedagogical and sociological thought. Drawing from the theoretical ruminations of John Dewey on civic education and democratic virtue, and relating to a host of authors on and practitioners of “social work” and “community organization,” democracy was decoupled from “its purely political terms.”⁸ Democracy was roughly equated with community life, stressing the imperatives of responsibility—“for one’s self, for the good of the neighbor, for the welfare of the Demos”—and “a sentiment of personality.”⁹ Such notions of educational, developmental democratic citizenship tapped into post-war practices of neighborhood planning and community building. In Britain, for instance, community centers were built with state support (the Ministries of Health and Education), and voluntary community associations were incorporated in the management of the center with the explicit aim to ameliorate the level of education and promote democratic citizenship at neighborhood level in the 1940s and 1950s.¹⁰

However, this article stretches beyond this semantic field of democracy, community, neighborhood, and civic responsibility, which indeed have informed neighborhood studies ever since the community organization discourse of the early twentieth century. This article re-engages with “the purely political terms” of post-blitz democratic renewal at neighborhood level. As much as a guiding principle in urban (sociospatial) planning, the neighborhood—as an epistemological category in urban thought—provoked ideas about democratic governance of urban affairs, and, more in particular, its institutional rearrangement, that is, the nature and characteristics of the local polity in peacetime. In other words, the neighborhood unit (and its amenities) did not only induce reformist thought about local democracy, it was, too, an expression of an agenda of democratic renewal that encompassed renegotiated ideas about political representation, decentralized self-government, and the urban polity.

As a case study, this article uses the redevelopment of the Dutch port city of Rotterdam in the 1940s and 1950s. Here, the urgencies of physical reconstruction and economic recovery after the devastating and traumatizing effects of the blitz of May 14, 1940—and later demolition by Nazi occupiers and allied air raids—tapped into the corollary (re)considerations of local democracy. Moreover, in Rotterdam, the wedding of neighborhood planning and political reform resulted in a feasible—and ultimately long-term—institutional renewal of local democracy. At a general level, Rotterdam's democratic reform served a broader, lurking agenda striving for a democracy without crowds, adhering to notions of consensus, consumerism, and a middle-class demos of active though disciplined democratic citizens—preferably living in well-designed and pre-conceived residential zones, such as the neighborhood unit.¹¹ More in particular, democratic reform served a long-debated agenda of decentralizing urban governance and local democracy.

The case study presented in this article engages with the so-called *wijkraden* (neighborhood councils) that were debated (in the 1940s and 1950s) and established (from 1947 onward) in Rotterdam. The *wijkraad* is best understood as a representative, political body that coincided with and operated within the confines of a particular neighborhood unit.¹² Moreover, its meeting halls, the municipally sponsored community centers that arose among the many neighborhood amenities in Rotterdam (e.g., shops, schools, churches, sports facilities, playgrounds, allotments), increasingly became physical reminders of the authorities' wish to foster neighborhood democracy as part of their encompassing agenda of reform. Regardless of its capacities, mandate, tasks, and composition, the neighborhood council had the ability, at least in theory, to articulate and represent the perceived interests of the neighborhood within the municipal whole of the city.

Before probing into Rotterdam's history of democratic practice at neighborhood level, the broader context of neighborhood politics will be outlined. Then, the vicissitudes of democratic reform, its laborious (two-track) institutional trajectory, its experimental nature, and its assessment by practitioners and theorists will be analyzed, largely based on primary literature and archival sources.

Wartime Origins of Neighborhood Politics

In the context of post-blitz or post-war urban redevelopment, the idea of neighborhood planning was incorporated into the repertoires of urban redevelopment of many (partly) destroyed European cities. One contemporary observer acknowledged concentration of neighborhood planning in post-war Britain, but was keen to point at recent examples in France, Belgium, Russia, and South Africa.¹³ Indeed, particularly in the British reconstruction plans, the neighborhood unit was prominently presented as part of the post-war resurrection of bombed cities such as Manchester, London, Liverpool, Plymouth, Portsmouth, Southampton, and Coventry.¹⁴ Neighborhood planning in these schemes referred to new residential zones and existing urban districts alike; it entailed (sub)urban expansion and the reiteration of existing residential districts, the latter implying a preceding and costly agenda of slum clearance, rethinking zoning plans, and compensating property- and landowners.

In Rotterdam, the Dutch icon of post-war redevelopment and urban resurrection, a social paragraph capitalizing on the neighborhood unit was lacking in the formal reconstruction plans. After the liberation from the Nazi occupiers in May 1945, a generic discourse about unity and social cohesion, about "community spirit" (*gemeenschapszin*), was fully out in the open and permeated debates about the politics of community building.¹⁵

Are our big cities still urban communities? Have they not gradually become great agglomerations of insularly living people, who still feel some connection to the social group to which they belong, but, outside of this group, feel lost in the masses?

asked Rotterdam's Mayor P. J. Oud rhetorically in early 1946, addressing the widespread concern about social cohesion in the post-war metropolis.¹⁶

Next to the perceived urgencies of post-blitz social regeneration, another context tapped into debates about neighborhood planning in Rotterdam: the—then recent—history of annexing adjacent municipalities. From the late nineteenth century onward, the municipality of Rotterdam usurped the territory of neighboring villages to obtain the necessary space to facilitate the port's grand expansion.¹⁷ During the war, in 1941, the national government agreed upon the annexation of (part of) eight municipalities together comprising sixty thousand inhabitants implying an increase of 10 percent in population and 50 percent in geographical size.¹⁸

The City Councilor G. E. van Walsum, who became mayor of Rotterdam in 1952, expressed his doubts about the large-scale annexations that, to him, affected “historically and organically grown” ties and bonds in the former villages.¹⁹ If annexation was inevitable, it was to be accompanied by some preservation of self-rule. One option to secure a degree of sub-municipal autonomy was the development of “neighborhood or district organisations with their own characteristics.”²⁰ When being appointed mayor in 1952, Van Walsum—who resigned from the orthodox-protestant party *Christelijk-Historische Unie* (CHU) and joined the new Labour party after the war—was the first to remind the people that he had already broached the issue of neighborhood planning through decentralized self-rule during the war. The ongoing disintegration of what was considered to be the genuine urban community had to be halted and reversed by an active policy of community building, using the neighborhood as the organizing principle, for existing and newly planned urban districts alike. This process had to be coordinated, Van Walsum believed, from the bottom-up, by political representatives of the neighborhoods themselves.

This sentiment, however, largely faded away due to the immediate needs of wartime crisis and the provisional reconstruction policies for the blitzed areas of the city. The economic recovery of the port industry and inner-city development was the authorities' main concern.²¹ No traces of community building or neighborhood planning are to be found in the formalized reconstruction schemes that materialized during the war. These plans prioritized inner-city reconstruction and the economic recovery. In Rotterdam, the neighborhood unit (*wijkgedachte*), thus, had to be addressed parallel to the politico-administrative trajectories leading toward the formal reconstruction plan, the *Basisplan 1946*.

Proposals for decentralized neighborhood planning came from a limited number of sources. In historiography, the prime thrust toward engagement in social reconstruction or community building is ascribed to the much-quoted book *De stad der toekomst, de toekomst der stad* (*The City of the Future, The Future of the City*). Published just after the war in April 1946, the book was the product of a study group established in 1943 under the leadership of Alexander Bos, the director of the municipal housing service. The “Group Bos” reflected on the problems of socio-cultural life and the maturing of the city against the background of what they perceived as a synthesis between individual and community. This synthesis infused the book with its remarkable holistic rhetoric:

We have witnessed the continuous struggle in every large city, a tension between the blurring and negative forces of urban life and the social inclinations of human nature: between the chaotic, the mechanic, the materialistic and the decay of which the modern city is the expression, and the need for co-operation and community, for a trusted milieu and the acceptance of responsibility.²²

Proceeding from a classically pessimistic diagnosis of social and moral decay (the lack of true community), it enlarged on the quintessential elements of sociocultural life in cities, from housing to education and from culture to religion, and finally indicated how this life would materialize *par excellence* in decentralized units such as the *wijk* (neighborhood unit) that corresponded with the alleged social capacities of the urbanite: “the neighborhood represents the maximum of what the individual may just experience as orderly and comprehensible.”²³ The *wijk*, then, was incorporated into the concentric model of urban life of which the largest sphere was the city as a

whole (*stadsgeheel*). The final pages subsequently furnished an in-depth prescription for the (number of) institutions and amenities for families that would enable the *wijk* (itself defined in quantitative terms) to prosper.

De stad der toekomst indeed represented a strand of thought that seemed to be missing in the formalized reconstruction schemes. However, partly from the same milieu of architects and urbanists as the contributors to Bos's study group, other intellectual sources of neighborhood thought need to be distinguished too. For instance, the architect Willem van Tijen, also a member of the abovementioned group, chaired the *Kerngroep Woningarchitectuur* (Domestic Architecture Core Group) that was a vibrant platform for architectural debate during the war. The report *Architecten-programma voor de Woningbouw* (Architectural Program for Housing), which was largely based on the outcomes of a questionnaire addressed by architects to other architects, took as one of its starting points "the social and cultural responsibility of the architect" and embraced the idea that knowledge, aesthetic preferences, and skills had no value without "healthy social relations" among urbanites.²⁴ In an attempt to redefine the task of the architect for the post-war period, Van Tijen *cum suis* presented a new template for architectural design that transcended the confines of a mere design for a physical structure. Through his work, the architect was obliged to promote the participation in the concentrically represented social world outside the family: "There has to be contact with the street, the direct environment [*de buurt*], the neighborhood [*de wijk*]." ²⁵ As the guiding planning principle for the post-war metropolis, the neighborhood would again allow for "contact between the individual and the community, which had been lost in the non-sectioned city."²⁶ A number of "minimum dwellings" distributed across six social categories (ranging from large family to single elderly) would ultimately be the main contribution by the architect to the perceived restoration of the urban community.²⁷

Largely outside the realm of architecture, another group of Rotterdam notables from civil society became engrossed in the entity that informed the discourse on social reconstruction: the neighborhood. This group called itself *de Rotterdamsche Gemeenschap* (the Rotterdam Community, later *Rotterdamse Gemeenschap* [RG]). Of course, its name was clearly chosen to signpost its emphasis on community formation. But the term itself was in fact borrowed from local and national initiatives in its pursuit of (national) community before the outbreak of the war. After a series of secret meetings, the RG was officially founded in September 1944, the month during which the first perceived signals of liberation from German occupation caused some social unrest in the south of the Netherlands.²⁸

The *Rotterdamsche Gemeenschap's* statutes of 1944 foreshadowed the immense energy it was to exert after the war with regard to community formation and organization. Its first task was to inform Rotterdam's citizens about the reconstruction process. Tours, exhibitions, and lectures were laid on to win over the larger part of the inhabitants for the city's future layout. This was a trenchant criticism of the low degree of contact with the citizens in connection with the reconstruction plans. Subsequently, the *Rotterdamsche Gemeenschap* was to develop a scheme whereby the people's wishes were communicated to the reconstruction authorities. Neighborhood interests and needs gave the *Rotterdamsche Gemeenschap* impetus in this respect. With regard to the actual reconstruction, the *Rotterdamsche Gemeenschap* propagated the neighborhood unit as part of the new extension plans, mainly south of the city, but also of inner-city reconstruction. Neighborhood centers would form the base for all activities in the planned lay-outs (e.g., Pendrecht and Zuidwijk) and old urban districts (e.g., Crooswijk and Het Oude Noorden) alike. In the latter case, neighborhood planning was seen as a means to regenerate deteriorating and blight areas that had been nominated for (partial) slum clearance projects during the late 1930s.

Youth work, family gatherings, leisure events, and the education of civic neighborhood leaders were given major prominence on the RG's agenda. These feasible institutions of social reconstruction were all subordinate to the greater human aspiration the *Rotterdamsche Gemeenschap* echoed, the integration of the individual into the family and, ultimately, into the urban community:

The Rotterdam Community wants to make the individual people aware of their responsibility for the Community and wants them to accept that responsibility. Its aim is to promote the *wijkgedachte* [neighborhood unit] in order to enable individuals, lost in the immense space of the big city, to assert themselves within a smaller, orderly context without losing contact with the larger whole.²⁹

In all this, the *Rotterdamsche Gemeenschap* functioned as a mouthpiece for the articulation of local sociocultural interests and was designed to serve as a sort of para-political force alongside the formal public authorities. As such, its political discourse included the lofty promise of responsible citizenship, but, as becomes clear from the archival sources, this promise translated into a well-defined institutional design of a renewed urban polity. This becomes apparent in its first brochure, *Wat wil de Rotterdamsche Gemeenschap?* (What does the Rotterdam Community Want?) published in early 1945.³⁰ Imposing a clearly political layer on top of the neighborhood-centered community building proposal, the *Rotterdamsche Gemeenschap* went beyond the mainly sociospatial and educational thoughts advanced by other groups showing an interest in neighborhood planning. In one of his many pleas, W. F. Geyl, the post-war secretary of the *Rotterdamsche Gemeenschap*, explicitly stated that much of the recent neighborhood unit's popularity was caused by a widespread feeling among "ordinary citizens" that "real participation in community matters" was rapidly declining in the age of reconstruction.³¹

During its formative stage, the *Rotterdamsche Gemeenschap* was trying to define its *demos*, that is, the members of a community eligible for political participation in urban affairs. A socio-cultural parliament was proposed, de *Vergadering van Afgevaardigden* (Assembly of Delegates), which comprised three types of representatives: *kring* (circle) members, neighborhood delegates, and representatives of civil society's voluntary associations.³²

Claiming to focus primarily on social and cultural affairs, it explicitly refrained from including trade unions, political parties, and religious communities. With regard to the city council, the *Rotterdamsche Gemeenschap* defined itself as an additional representative institution for the welfare of the city and its citizens, adopting an explicit trans-ideological stance: no political parties or ideologically blinkered organizations were eligible for participation. The Assembly's scope was much narrower than the city council's, and its recruitment and representation resources differed fundamentally from the electoral procedures of vested political bodies.

This politico-democratic epistemology of the neighborhood unit, as expounded in the early days of the *RG*, was not only related to burgeoning ideas about a "political breakthrough"—basically, the notion that war would end the segmentation of Dutch society into more or less isolated ideological blocks—but also linked up with long-pending debates about the organization of a democratic community in which both individuals and collectives were formally recognized as political agents. The whole agenda of community formation was supported by elaborate political organization, making the neighborhood unit not only a planning instrument, but also, and probably first and foremost, an explicit vehicle for political reform in the urban context. In the case of Rotterdam, the preliminary wartime thoughts of the *RG* were, however, severely challenged—and ultimately overshadowed—by governmental intervention. As the *RG* was forced to distance itself from its agenda of democratic reform—and subsequently engaged in hands-on community work from the late 1940s onward—local authorities took up the gauntlet—further inflating neighborhood planning with aspirations of institutional renewal of urban democracy.

Private Initiative and Municipal Intervention

The institutionalization of the neighborhood unit in post-war Rotterdam policy making may be seen as a development along two intertwined trajectories both stemming from the wartime debates about social regeneration set out above. The first trajectory encapsulated the social and cultural sphere of neighborhood life. It amounted to social and cultural work that was

increasingly initiated by a host of voluntary associations within the confines of a neighborhood. From the mid-1950s onward, neighborhood foundations coordinated these initiatives and were included in the community work policies (*wijkopbouw*) as enacted by the municipality and supported by the Dutch government.³³ A similar configuration of community work was constituted in Britain from the mid-1940s onward, where voluntary associations were entitled to state funding of neighborhood activities, particularly with regard to educational programs and the construction of community centers.³⁴

Within this realm of community organization, the *RG*—which after a thorough reorganization due to lack of support and internal discord—focused entirely on small-scale grassroots initiatives—would retain some of its influence on the agenda of neighborhood planning. The predominant narrative underpinning this “community organisation” rendered an imperative of neighborliness and sociability that would promote community spirit in the neighborhoods. Or as was phrased in one of the many outcries of the first post-war decade, “Let us be familiar with every street in our neighborhood. That infers: one has to go there once in a while!”³⁵ Such appeals show a remarkable paradox between an alleged self-inspired active citizenship and the imperatives of sociability to which urbanites became increasingly subjected after the Second World War.

The second trajectory of the institutionalization of the neighborhood as a category in urban affairs entailed the incorporation of neighborhoods in the polity as part of an agenda of decentralization of urban governance. After the war, with the piecemeal re-instatement of Dutch elected municipal authorities after the liberation from Nazi rule in May 1945, neighborhood planning as a project of democratic and political reform was largely taken out of the hands of voluntary groups such as the *Rotterdamsche Gemeenschap*. Instead, a municipal agenda of neighborhood politics emerged and dominated the debates about the institutional design of urban democracy. This mode of reform gained institutional grounding in 1947, when a new municipal act allowed for the installation of neighborhood councils (*wijkraden*) throughout the city.

The neighborhood councils marked the starting point of a governmental experiment with decentralized participatory democracy in the urban context, in which a strong resonance of collective and democratic virtue was discernible. The master narrative behind the neighborhood councils addressed the necessity to bring rulers and the ruled closer together. Neighborhood councils would be able to continuously mediate between the municipal authorities and the urbanites, it was believed. They reflected a conviction that participation in local affairs at the grassroots level was only to be achieved by top-down generated stimuli, rather than from the bottom-up—as was the idea of the *Rotterdamsche Gemeenschap*, for instance.

Rotterdam was the first Dutch city—and to my knowledge, one of the first in Western European cities—to formally insert sub-municipal, statutory bodies (neighborhood councils) into the polity. As such, practitioners and theorists of local government alike considered it as a highly experimental resolution. As new public bodies with certain representative capacities, the neighborhood councils embodied a novelty in public administration and constitutional debate. And, as deliberative platforms of neighborhood-bound representatives, the councils introduced a new political practice to urban governance.

The Dutch constitutional framework did not allow for the delegation of legislative powers to the neighborhood councils. Thus, in the municipal regulations of Rotterdam, these councils were vested with advisory capacities with regard to the municipal executive. Furthermore, the councils were allowed to submit advices relating to specific neighborhood affairs unsolicited to the municipal council and the executive. As such, the neighborhood councils were added to a host of historically grown practices and institutions (e.g., commissions of support or local advisory councils in the realm of trade and industry) that were involved in the preparatory and consultative procedures of municipal policy making. It would take until the early 1970s, when neighborhood councils could legitimately exert rule-making powers, and subsequently were reshaped as elected “municipal sub-councils” (*deelgemeenteraad*). Nevertheless, the creation of the councils was

considered to be a compromise “between the demands for more participation in government and the possibilities of our constitution.”³⁶

The municipal executive appointed neighborhood council members, taking into account the “political, religious and any other ideological variety” within the neighborhood at issue. The councils, thus, were expected to be representative in a mimetic vein: its composition should reflect the composition of the neighborhood’s citizenry. In practice, the results of the municipal elections of 1946—and again in 1949—were used to distribute the neighborhood councils’ seats proportionally among the political groupings. As such, the municipality did not adopt the trans-ideological, non-partisan convictions of the *Rotterdamsche Gemeenschap*. Citizens were eligible for membership on the basis of the register for municipal elections. Double memberships (for the municipal and the neighborhood councils) were prohibited. Councils would have between seven and twenty-five members, appointed for the same term as the municipal council (four years), depending on the neighborhood’s population size.

Communist party members were not taken into consideration. Formally, the mayor declared the communist share in the neighborhoods too small to become entitled to a seat in the neighborhood councils, but, he added, neighborhood councils are “democratic institutions, and if one wants to participate in the democracy, one has to subscribe to the rules of the game.”³⁷ Communist parties had been excluded from the advisory commissions of the municipal council before. The exclusion of communists from the neighborhood councils marked a clear representative deficit of the neighborhood council experiment as they had received almost 20 percent of the vote, becoming the second party in Rotterdam in 1946.

In 1947, the first neighborhood council (*wijkraad*) was installed in the remote district of Hoek van Holland. Seven people from Hoek were appointed and an additional two from Rotterdam. Institutional precedent was the so-called Beach Commission, a regulatory commission in which municipal officials discussed beach management with locals and shopkeepers.³⁸ Later Pernis, Heyplaat, and Overschie followed, all of them being former villages at the fringes of the municipal borders. In total, eleven councils were installed until 1953.

It is no coincidence that the first neighborhood councils were installed in districts that had been subjected to annexation in the inter-war period. It was widely believed that the former villages hardly felt connected to the urban affairs of Rotterdam. Neighborhood councils were partly explained as instances of retribution; the city had taken the autonomy of its surrounding villages (most radically by the annexation of 1941) and now was giving back part of its self-rule. The neighborhood councils, in other words, would promote a certain political engagement that, ultimately, would foster a widely shared engagement in the urban conglomeration as a whole.

How did the municipal experiment with the neighborhood councils then relate to the first trajectory of neighborhood politics, the sociocultural regeneration of urban life? As a whole, initiatives oriented toward the amelioration of neighborhood life were considered to share a similar goal, whether municipal or voluntary. The gamut of neighborhood activities in the post-war decades were directed toward the “activation of democracy,” to use the phrase of an alderman of the late 1960s, and to “counterbalance the tendencies of amassment and isolation, which threaten the life of every metropolitan population.”³⁹ Activation has to be taken quite literally here: the term captures a conception of active citizenship that centers on participation in the institutions in the direct daily environments of the urbanite—the voluntary associations, political parties, church life and, evidently, neighborhood councils.

However, alongside the municipally initiated neighborhood councils, voluntary associations spurred the sociocultural agenda of neighborhood politics. Particularly, the *Rotterdamsche Gemeenschap*, having involuntarily transferred their political reform agenda to municipal authorities, succeeded in institutionalizing social and cultural work at neighborhood level. Their neighborhood divisions became *wijkbesturen* (neighborhood boards) in which varying mixes of associational and religious life coordinated a whole range of neighborhood activities. In public

discourse, the *wijkbesturen* (voluntary) and the *wijkraden* (municipal) were referred to with the same generic term, *wijkorganen* (neighborhood organs). Both neighborhood institutions were considered to serve the same agenda of urban reform.⁴⁰

Notions of decentralization of the polity, self-government, and political representation of neighborhood interests informed the municipally created neighborhood councils. In contrast, the private neighborhood boards leaned heavily toward the developmental and pedagogical conception of democratic citizenship, that is, the language of civic responsibility. In more feasible terms, the former encompassed a reconfiguration of relations between citizens and authorities in urban governance, whereas the latter was limited to the promotion of social and cultural activities among citizens—first and foremost by voluntary associations—at neighborhood level, which would, ultimately, foster some mode of internalized democratic citizenship. In retrospect, in 1968, this juxtaposition was phrased as “governmental action in the neighborhood” versus “self-activation of neighborhood residents in group associations.”⁴¹

The institutionalization of neighborhood politics thus had a hybrid genesis in Rotterdam. On one hand, the private neighborhood boards under the aegis of the *Rotterdamsche Gemeenschap* embodied grassroots activism in a variety of neighborhoods. On the other hand, the public neighborhood councils, installed by the municipality, represented a top-down initiated scheme of citizen participation in (decentralized) urban governance. This hybrid character of neighborhood politics resulted in an ongoing debate about the division of tasks, competences, and neighborhood representatives between the two bodies. In some neighborhoods, both bodies were present, in others, only a council or a board existed.

Praise and Critique

In general, to reiterate, the Rotterdam agenda of political activation and participation was fully framed in terms of neighborhood planning. The restoration of the urban community, Mayor Oud believed, was to take place at neighborhood level: “We have to decentralize the big city. We have to try to reawaken the autonomous neighborhoods that constitute it.”⁴² With great faith in its potential, Oud thus swore in the first neighborhood council of Hoek van Holland:

It is an important matter, which we are about to engage in . . . Many things need to be done differently than before 1940. That too involves . . . the cultivation of a good sense of public responsibility and a good community life within one’s own small community.⁴³

However, the predominant framework of the neighborhood was translated into two increasingly juxtaposing discourses on urban reform by the end of the 1940s. On one hand, urbanists forwarded their holistic conception of democratic citizenship as part of social regeneration schemes through neighborhood planning. On the other hand, a burgeoning reform discourse of political theorists permeated neighborhood-planning debates with instrumental ideas about creating a new democratic polity and efficient administrative routines. Whereas the former would experience fundamental critique amounting to the disenchantment of the neighborhood unit in the Netherlands—as will become clear below, the latter discourse was rather easily detached from the neighborhood unit paradigm and continued as a rather technical discussion about the organization and implications of (urban) decentralization.

The establishment of the decentralization of local democracy in Rotterdam revolved around some of the classical hallmarks of modern democracy: elections and political representativeness. Despite the hope vested in the neighborhood council experiment by many, serious doubts were raised about the absence of elections, for many, the *conditio sine que non* for any democratic method. An anonymous commentator in a reform socialist newspaper opted for a radical different recruitment mechanism. If the neighborhood councils were aimed at the amelioration of the

relationship between the urbanite and its authorities, it should reflect the collective interests of a neighborhood rather than being a derivate of the municipal council. The chairmen of the numerous voluntary associations, in the realm of leisure activities, sports, or charity work for instance, had to become the councils' members, preferably as elected delegates. The neighborhood's *demos*, in other words, was only to be represented through its voluntary associations, which, in turn, were the most significant bearers of neighborhood interests.

This discourse harked back to the inter-war debates about the insertion of organized interests into various realms of governance that were burgeoning throughout Europe.⁴⁴ One key proposition was to have national voluntary associations' (i.e., organized interest groups such as trade unions) delegates represented in a host of advisory and consultative bodies that were created to assist the government in complex policy affairs, and theoretically, had the potential of becoming corporatist additions to the polity with legislative qualities in (defined socio-economic) realms of society. A new nexus of decentralized participatory schemes (*medezeggenschap* in Dutch) was envisaged that, according to advocates of democracy, would fortify the democratic polity as a whole and promote democratic engagement among the people, or, according to democracy's adversaries, would offer alternative avenues of circumventing the failing institutions of parliamentary democracy and representative government—and thus usher in the destruction of democracy.

Although highly diverging ideologically and nationally, this discourse postulated in its very essence an intrinsic connection between decentralized forms of governance and some imperative of civil participation at grassroots level, such as the shop floor or the hamlet. Experiments or concrete proposals of such decentralization of governance took two directions in the Netherlands during the mid-twentieth century. One current of proponents forwarded the notion of “functional decentralisation,” whereas another strand of reformers put emphasis on the notion of “territorial decentralisation.” The former opted for the fragmentation of politics along the lines of a certain “functions” in society (e.g., economic sectors such as agriculture, trade, industry, but also the domains of housing, health care, and unemployment relief). The latter, in contrast, referred to additional territorial politico-administrative entities within the polity, that is, sub-municipal representative institutions.

The neighborhood councils in Rotterdam, in many ways, alluded to both agendas of decentralization. As it became increasingly accepted within the broader intellectual framework of the neighborhood unit (*wijkgedachte*), neighborhoods, as the main sociospatial entities of (sub)urban community life, also contained interests specifically and exclusively related to the entity of the neighborhood as such; the neighborhood, as much as agriculture or housing, embodied a societal function—that is, community building—that was entitled to its own mechanisms of interest articulation and its own modes of participatory governance. Evidently, as an administrative entity defined by its territorial boundaries, neighborhoods also appealed to advocates of territorial decentralization who wanted to add a sub-municipal sphere of public governance to the existing defined layers of Dutch government (i.e., the central state, the provinces, the municipalities, and the water boards).

Whereas inter-war debates about decentralization allowed for the articulation of authoritarian or anti-parliamentarian alternatives to the democratic polity, post-war discourse echoed the gospel of democracy at large. Democracy was the leading principle—which was all but univocally expressed and explained. Many variations can be found. A Catholic Dutch newspaper regarded the neighborhood councils as a solution to what they perceived as the largest internal threat to democracy: “apathy towards political life.” Participation in neighborhood affairs would “deliver the lonesome citizen from the spell of indifference” and subsequently recreate “the publicly spirited human.”⁴⁵ For the municipal elections in 1949, the Catholic People's Party (KVP) introduced its program with the motto “In local government lays our first defence of democracy!” to then state that neighborhood councils would buttress this defense best.⁴⁶

A socialist newspaper similarly stated that the proliferation of neighborhood councils would ensure that “democracy will be truly reinvigorated and the ordinary citizen will respect his rights and duties much better than he does now.”⁴⁷ The neighborhood unit advocate Geyl added to this that “the community is the basis of democracy since one enjoys a social education within it and one acquires understanding of social relations, which are impeded in the non-segmented [neighborhoodless] city.”⁴⁸ Or in the words of Rotterdam’s Mayor P. J. Oud, “The autonomy of the smaller living communities is the best means to arrive at the self-rule of the local citizenry . . . The continuation of decentralization on all levels is imperative.”⁴⁹

In his new year’s address to the municipal council in 1948, Mayor Oud again stressed the promise of the neighborhood councils: “the neighborhood councils will prove to be the right solution to the metropolitan problem. They constitute, too, an element that will contribute to the unification of the separated groups in our ever growing municipality into a single community.”⁵⁰ At various occasions, particularly at the installation meetings of the new councils, Oud reiterated that he wanted to extend the statutory powers of the councils in the near future. However, in the early 1950s, the gospel of hope and democracy became increasingly unlinked from the neighborhood councils. Promise and enthusiasm made way for sober evaluation of the experiment.

On January 14, 1953, Mayor Van Walsum, Oud’s successor, installed a study commission that was to evaluate the first term of the eleven neighborhood councils of Rotterdam. The commission comprised member-chairmen of some of the neighborhood councils, representatives of the board of the voluntary association of the *RG* and some municipal officials. At the inaugural meeting, the mayor stressed the urgency to assess the “experimentation” of the past four years.⁵¹ The commission’s chairman, the high civil servant J. Hasper, concluded from his preliminary study of the neighborhood councils’ minutes that “in many cases people have experienced the neighborhood work differently than they had expected in advance.”⁵²

Having studied the minutes and documentation of all councils, Chairman Hasper witnessed “an appalling deficiency with regard to matters of government among the members of the neighborhood council.”⁵⁶ He was very hesitant toward the expansion of tasks of the councils. From within the councils, a different critique was emerging. The chairman of the neighborhood council of Overschie, for instance, questioned the sincere intentions of the municipality; he thought of his council as a “sop,” since it was not mandated to engage in substantial policy making.⁵³

As advisory councils to the municipal executive, the neighborhood councils suffered from a fundamental expert deficit in local affairs. As representative bodies, they lacked the legitimacy derived from direct elections; the use of local election results as the distributive code for the division of seats did not correspond with the existing non-partisan personal preferences within each neighborhood. Whereas in the municipal council party politics was thriving, ideological orientations were less relevant on the neighborhood level.

In 1955, a report by a state study commission on local government supported the delegation of tasks from the municipal executive to the neighborhood councils.⁵⁴ It also subscribed to a variety of recruitment mechanisms from which a municipality was allowed to choose, whether by means of elections, appointment, or delegation from voluntary associations. The Rotterdam study commission, however, concluded exactly the opposite in 1957: neighborhood councils had to remain mere advisory bodies that had to specialize in social and cultural issues.

The realism and hesitance that emanated from the study commission’s report may not only be understood as the result of firsthand practical experience with neighborhood councils. The whole idea of the neighborhood being the defining principle in urban planning was put to the test from the mid-1950s onward. Whereas proponents of neighborhood planning stressed the centripetal powers emanating from decentralized social and spatial planning, antagonists of the neighborhood increasingly warned for the overstatement of the holistic promises of the neighborhood framework. To the latter group, the neighborhood unit needed sharper and better articulation, if

not a systematic, fine-grained theoretical model, if it was to be the defining principle in urban planning in the first place. Or in the words of the famous urbanist Lewis Mumford,

Has not the time come for a much more comprehensive canvass of the social functions of the neighborhood, for a more subtle and sympathetic interpretation of the needs of urban families at every stage in the cycle of human growth, and a more adventurous exploration of alternative solutions?⁵⁵

However, in the same text, Mumford did not hesitate to declare that “neighborhood unit organisation seems the only practical answer to the giantism and inefficiency of the over-centralised metropolis.”⁵⁶ He did not do away with terminology and acknowledged the need for decentralization.

Such ambivalent messages resonated in the Dutch urban planning context too. An early critique came from the socially engaged architect S. J. van Embden who in 1949 wrote, “Usually neighborliness does not lead to more than an agreeable provincialism finding its highest expression in some folkloristic manifestation.”⁵⁷ Following this line of reasoning, neighborhood councils, to Van Embden, amounted to “governmental education” that would erode the “unalienable right of the free man to express and shape his mental life.”⁶⁷ To put it bluntly, the promise of grassroots democratic participation, in a Dewey-like vein, was nothing more than a veneer of unprecedented top-down planning ambitions in Rotterdam.

With direct regard to the neighborhood council experiment in Rotterdam, the well-known neighborhood unit advocate W. F. Geyl had already expressed fundamental doubts. He applauded the municipality’s efforts to foster community participation in urban governance. However, the installation of the councils should be a temporary measure. People should be able to compose their own bodies without municipal supervision; the council needed to be “autochthonous” first and foremost.⁵⁸

At greater distance of the urban realities of Rotterdam, the famous sociologist J. A. A. van Doorn heavily criticized the rather holistic ambitions vested in neighborhood planning. He questioned the popularity of the neighborhood unit among planners and administrators by posing the rhetorical question if neighborhoods were in fact “realistic frameworks of integration” in urban planning. He echoed Van Embden’s critique by concluding that “forced manifestations of community” would never promote the social and democratic progress as envisaged in planning discourse of the 1940s and early 1950s.⁵⁹ His analysis, addressed at a conference about social cohesion in cities in 1955, is frequently referred to as the end of the Dutch neighborhood gospel of the first decade of post-war recovery.⁶⁰

Within the Dutch Labour party, one of the fiercest proponents in the early days, the virtues of neighborhood planning were gradually denied. The socialist urban politician and publicist G. W. B. Borrie wrote, “The ideas about the creation of ‘neighborhood communities’ have reflected a lack of sense of reality that neglects the modern development of human society.”⁶¹ More specific proposals about neighborhood councils were still “very theoretical and vague.”⁶²

These and similar critiques amounted to a reality check with regard to the promises of the neighborhood unit and its council. However, the trajectory of decentralization of the urban polity did not end with these critiques on neighborhood thought. The promulgation of a municipal act in 1963 vested the neighborhood councils with additional tasks in the realm of social and cultural policies, thus, encroaching the domain of the private neighborhood boards. Subsequent constitutional reform allowed for the displacement of legislative tasks to sub-municipal bodies from 1964 onward. This resulted in a fundamental change in Rotterdam’s decentralization project in 1972: the neighborhood councils were transformed into elected and political *deelgemeenten* that stretched far beyond the confines of a single neighborhood—as opposed the private neighborhood boards that became formally subordinate, as executive agencies, to the *deelgemeenten*.⁶³

The decentralization of local democracy was definitely decoupled from the rapidly fading neighborhood unit paradigm in urban planning. During the transitional period in the 1970s and 1980s, (provisional) neighborhood councils, private neighborhood boards, and elected *deelgemeenten* coexisted in a rather desultory way, until, during the 1990s, the whole urban environment was covered with *deelgemeenten*, which had usurped the old neighborhood councils.⁶⁴ Very recently, in early 2014, the *deelgemeenten*, have been abolished as elected political bodies and downscaled to appointed advisory boards to the central municipality. As such, the experimental interlude of the late 1940s and early 1950s produced the trajectory of post-war democratic reform, which remained underpinned by a firm belief in the decentralization of urban governance, but became dislodged from neighborhood unit thought as soon as lucid critiques emerged on its normative sociocultural and humanist assumptions in the 1950s. Whereas the social postulations behind neighborhood planning were increasingly perceived as unworkable reifications, the political engineering of decentralized local democracy remained an ongoing, though contested, practice in Rotterdam up until the present day.

Conclusion

As much as a post-war project to promote social regeneration of the urban community, neighborhood planning in Rotterdam amounted to the political engineering of the urban polity and governance procedures at a sub-municipal level. The installation of *wijkraden* (neighborhood councils) was the feasible institutional expression of such democratic reform. Neighborhood democracy would contribute to the reinvigoration of democratic politics and society, but, in the same breath, were cogs in the social project of neighborhood planning too: the regeneration of the local community along the lines of a moral imperative of neighborliness, civic and political participation, a family life shaped by predetermined gender and generational patterns, an industrious work ethic, and, in the course of the 1950s, consumerist affluence.

The Rotterdam experiment resembles some of the attempts in other cities to include associational life in urban governance affairs after the Second World War, for instance, the British Community Associations in community center management.⁶⁵ However, and in strong contrast to Britain but also other Dutch cities, popular participation in urban affairs in Rotterdam was heavily predetermined and regulated by an interventionist agenda of the local authorities. Ultimately, the trajectory of decentralization set out by the local authorities outshined the largely bottom-up molded agenda of social and cultural regeneration, as promoted and executed by, for instance, the voluntary association *De Rotterdamsche Gemeenschap*. From the late 1960s onward, the framework of the neighborhood was replaced by a much-debated template for political decentralization that did not subscribe to the alleged historically grown boundaries of a neighborhood, but was underpinned by a quantitative definition of the sub-municipal *demos*, that is, about 100,000 citizens.

To sum up, the experimental interlude between the devastations of the blitz and warfare and the promulgation of constitutional and legal frameworks of (welfare) governance in Western states produced a rather holistic belief in the neighborhood as the organizing principle in spatial planning and community building. Ideas about participatory schemes in urban governance linked up with neighborhood planning. In Rotterdam, these ideas were translated into a dual trajectory of democratic reform, which uneasily combined sociocultural conceptions of democratic citizenship at grassroots level and an institutional redesign of the urban polity that would encapsulate the articulation of neighborhood interests through formal political bodies, the *wijkraden*. Ultimately, welfare centralism, municipal authoritarianism, and burgeoning neighborhood-planning critique caused the bifurcation of this trajectory. Neighborhood-based social work was largely decoupled from its democratic semantics, whereas decentralized urban democracy became a contested tenet in local democracy and governance debates in Rotterdam up until the present day.

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Notes

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