The amount of entrepreneurs that develop new products or services, from a circular economy perspective, increases. If these entrepreneurs no longer will be a niche, but will form a mainstream market, what will be the effect on the city and more specific its public space?

During this expert meeting were three scenarios of an Urban Circular Economy in the city and their effects on the public space presented. These scenarios were furthermore used to debate the case study BlueCity: What are the challenges and opportunities of opening up the former Tropicana building for the public?
Urban Circular Economy

Citizens are not very concerned about circular economy. One of the reasons herefore is that research on circular economy mainly focuses on the larger streams that are running through the city like energy, waste, water and cycles between larger companies.

However, an urban variant of circular economy currently arises out of local entrepreneurship. Young entrepreneurs come up with new goods or services that push forward a recycle, lease or share economy. What if these young entrepreneurs grow from a niche towards a mainstream market? What will be the influence on (public and private) urban development? And how will citizens, as users, get more involved in an urban circular economy?

This process resulted in three spatial future scenarios. Whereas in ‘Business Almost As Usual’ the focus will be on making the existing production more sustainable with no or minor effort of the consumer, ‘Sustainability as Pocket Money’ will be about valorizing the latent value of domestic waste (ex. upcycling, repairing, ...) and in ‘Sustainability as Lifestyle’ the community aspect, leasing and sharing will be the main facets. These three scenarios were shortly described during the presentation, with a focus on their (positive and negative) effect on public space.

Case Study BlueCity in Tropicana

BlueCity is a network of entrepreneurs, which work with the waste of the city. Their goal is to use economy in order to close the local materials circle in Rotterdam, leaving as less waste as possible. BlueCity is therefore not just the former Tropicana building. The building does play a big role in the BlueCity network however, as an incubator place and an engine to help the network grow and prosper in Rotterdam.

Opening up their building for public uses is an important step in this growth in Rotterdam. The building will be offering different services for the entrepreneurs and inhabitants of the city such as: workplaces, maker space, restaurant, library (of products), open knowledge centre and others.

The programme in the building is set up as city with different services. The building is a part of Rotterdam and needs the city to operate. From its part, BlueCity empowers the citizens of Rotterdam by showing that a sustaining economy can work.

The building is known and iconic from a distance. But once nearby, it is very close to the public. What would opening the building for the public entail for BlueCity?
In the perspective “Business (almost) as Usual” the customer is a consumer and owner of the products he/she buys and afterwards disposes. The sustainability of the supply chain (and goods) depends on the producer (Unilever, Colruyt). This perspective is closely linked to the strengthening of a circular economy between companies.

For the circular economy to work fully in this perspective, the perfect conditions for the shoppers to buy goods and to dispose their waste need to be created in the public space. As a result, this scenario increases disneyification: shopping and disposing needs to be fun! As a positive experience is so crucial, this scenario leads to more control in the public space.

Looking at the case study, the building would be opened to inform people on BlueCity. Tropicana as the place to organise conferences for change makers and where you can see the transition to a Blue Economy taking place, fits also in this scenario. Informing can also be done in a very pleasant (festival) way. There can be games for kids and workshops for their parents. Being as open as manageable was used to describe the openness. When asking the audience what they are willing to do to enter, it became obvious that filling in forms is a no go. A good example that was put forward is Vapiano, an Italian shop in Rotterdam. Here, when the customer enters he/she gets a card and can shop as long as wanted. When the customer leaves, the card is left behind. The shop knows what the customer has been doing, with out knowing who the customer is. Specific for BlueCity privileges to go to specific areas could be added at the card. A card that gives more opportunities for unique experiences makes it easier to ask for more personal details.

The idea of having a certain level of control would make the former Tropicana building similar to the Rotterdam Market Hall. A building with a distinctive profile and atmosphere, but at the end, it is a shopping mall that increasingly becomes an amusement park.
In the perspective “Sustainability as Pocket Money”, the customer will still buy the product, but as the owner of the product he/she will rent out its temporary use (Airbnb) or lend it (Peerby). When the product is at the end of its use the owner shall return it (Marktplaats) or sell the materials (Afval Loont). As more products are in circulation and being reused, the user will play an active role in the sustainability of the product and the supply chain.

Concerning the public spaces, this scenario, leads to an increase of markets, as people have more home made products to sell. Due to materials getting a value, an increase of fences can also be expected, creating harsh borders between the public and the private space.

Debating this scenario, some interesting points of view emerged. Waste, once put outside the home, is a public thing. This scenario privatises the waste. Processing the waste is no longer a service of the municipality to the citizen, but it becomes a personal effort. The citizen has to make a new product out of it (enquires knowledge, time and energy) or sells it to the highest bidder. This only can work if reworking waste is made easy for the mass: an Ikeafication of the waste process. Another important aspect is the need of a wide network of high and low skilled entrepreneurs who can rework the different kinds of waste. As this network enlarges the need grows to find ways to easily collect also the smaller amount of specific waste from the citizens. For such a network to develop, the waste streams need to be more clear. Where can which waste be found with a minimum of effort?

The building in the case study could become a designated market for BlueCity products made in the building or Rotterdam. People can as well sell their innovative and qualitative products to customers as the left overs materials to other entrepreneurs in this market. A part of the market could be brand as a test use the owner shall return it (Marktplaats) or sell the materials (Afval Loont). As more products are in circulation and being reused, the user will play an active role in the sustainability of the product and the supply chain.

In this perspective different principles of the sharing economy can be found. The tragedy of the commons is an economic theory of a situation where individual users acting independently according to their own self-interest bar- rage common goods. In the commons the individual user does not value the resource through their collective action. The prisoner’s dilemma is a standard example of a game analyzed in game theory that has the properties of an optimally cooperating “rational” individuals might not cooperate, even if it appears that it is in their best interests to do so.

The third perspective “Sustainability as Lifestyle” goes a step beyond in trying to avoid waste at the source. Here, the customer no longer buys the product but will, regulate the use of the product from a supplier (Greenwheels, Cambio) by the establishment of cooperatives for example. Besides cooperatives, other forms of cooperation are possible. Again products circulate longer and at the end of their use the materials are still reused as a result of which the user also plays an active role in increase of the sustainability of the product and thus chain. In this perspective, different principles of the sharing economy can be found.

This scenario leads to a more common use of the street. Due to sharing cars, fewer parking spaces are needed and the street can become a shared space. Sharing goods also makes less need for storage rooms. Here commu- nal services such as sauna’s can be located. However, the growth of communal use in this scenario can also lead to an increase of gated communities.

During the debate it became obvious that maybe there are less parked cars, but the logistics concerning goods will increase. Creating new functions in former storages spaces will spark a debate on what those functions will be and more specific who will maintain them. There has to be trust, transparency and respect built in the social network in order to avoid the tragedy of the commons or the prisoner’s dilemma. This social network works best on the scale of the neighbour- hood. It should not be scaled up, but it can be copied through out the city. In this scenario is the social aspect more important than in the other scenario’s. It is relatively easy to start a community. It becomes difficult when the community realises they all use the same words, but give a different meaning to them. Therefore a common language needs to be created within the group. Lastly there was the comment: How can the community be inclusive to people who are not part of the main socio-economic group if smaller communities are formed.

In the case study would the building function as Leeszaal West in this scenario. This is a community library in Rotterdam West and a place where you can meet, share knowledge and bring and take goods. A community library is an interesting concept for BlueCity as it strongly connects to the BlueCity Philosophies of a new way of local demand and supply. If visitors come, they are able to take something (products, knowledge, inspiration,…), but should also be able to bring something (waste, knowledge, time, voluntary work, testing, ideas but not time to develop it,…)

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Urban Circular Economy is a project developed by David Dooghe and Buro Boris for the open call: ‘The Urban Metabolism’, organised by the Creative Industries Fund NL.

The expert meeting was next to an IABR event also part of the Open Source Circular Economy Days, a global event to develop a sustainable circular economy through open source collaboration.

The case study BlueCity was presented by Sabine Biesheuvel, Loeke Molenaars and Emma van der Leest.

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#StedelijkeCirculaireEconomie
#UrbanCircularEconomy