



MaterialDistrict Rotterdam 2019: an interview with Cees Donkers

“Urban Lab” is the theme that Urban & Landscapes ambassador Cees Donkers considers important for our annual trade fair MaterialDistrict Rotterdam. Donkers was the city architect of Design City Eindhoven in the Netherlands until his retirement, and knows like no other that a city is constantly in motion. What is his opinion about the meaning of materials in the urban landscape?

1. What does the city and/or the landscape look like in 100 years if it were up to you?

Cities could be dense societies in the hart, connected to centres of mobility and 24/7 city-life with a wide ring of urban villages around and green parks and water in between.

The parks are connected to the landscape surrounding it, which is partly filled with a low density of ‘landscape living’ farmers, tiny houses and dachas in a nature setting, like little settlements.

In between those cities is nature that is protected.

2. What do you think is the best invention ever and why?

Human brains. While not actually an invention, it has developed over many centuries of evolution and it is what separates us from animals. We have a lot of problems currently - think of overpopulation and pollution - but brains could be the ‘engine’ or ‘tool’ to survive on earth. It makes it possible to control and keep balance between left and right part of the brains, between emotion and reason, between sensitivity and knowledge. Brainport (Eindhoven) has proven to be the innovation hub for a ‘creative economy’. I

would like to add the BrainFIELD of seeds of a younger generation, needed to change the future.

3. What do you think are the most important material innovations within your sector of Urban & Landscapes and why?

Transformation. This term I use to describe also the reuse of old buildings for new functions, rather than demolition. The reuse of the former first factory of PHILIPS (built in 1920) became the icon for a completely new identity of the city!

We were used to invent new ways of living and housing and use of landscape by demolishing the past and build new updated versions of our daily life. During the past 30 years, we discovered that we used the planet 'for free' without feeling responsible for the future generations, in the meantime living with more and more people using more and more natural sources.

Using our brains makes us aware of the fact that we cannot continue in this behaviour so we have to change. Transformation makes it possible to change and re-use the past. So less or even no waste anymore and smart or, even better, wise creativity for a better society.

Transformation has been important throughout my career. When I started working in Eindhoven, I pleaded for the preservation of the (white) village where I bought a house, 40 years ago. Rather than focusing on the upkeep of my own house, I put my energy into organising a maintenance fund for the village. This was the start of my career.

Later, I started organising a programme called 'Q-Café', in which the Q stands for quality and the setting was a bar. Q-Café invited people to talk about the quality of the city. One subject was a building owned by Philips, called De Witte Dame (The White Lady), that was supposed to be demolished. I got a job with the local government, and my first project was to preserve and transform this building. In the 90s, Eindhoven was voted the

ugliest city in the Netherlands. Thanks to the transformation of De Witte Dame, which turned into an icon for design, this view has changed. From 'ugly duck to a design pearl'. Since then, I have transformed many buildings, which offers many possibilities for the future.

4. With which other sector is your sector the most closely related, and is the most similarity or cross-pollination in material innovation?

Education is the way to change the future. Young people are my professors to teach me about the needs for their generation and the way they view the future. I can share my experiences for the last 40 years of development to ask them about their opinions and help them to find innovative new ways and answers to their questions. They can come up with outside-the-box solutions that sometimes give new life to crazy ideas and give me the energy for lifelong learning. Listening to young people is therefore the most important way to develop new ideas. So again the balance between brains and emotions, left and right part of the brains. The project 60+/30- creates a new way of living. An old villa, school, factory or even office could be used for a new community in which shared spaces can offer more care. Cooperative ownership can be a solution for those who cannot afford a mortgage.

Share and care without money but on a voluntary base can create less loneliness and sharing of knowledge and experience in a lifelong learning context.

5. Which theme is currently the most important in your sector?

That would be transformation again. We found out that transformation can keep the balance between the past and the future in City Development. And related to that, sustainability in relation to natural sources, but also mobility (related to the need for that), smart or better use of technology.

When you look at graduates these days, for instance from the Design Academy in Eindhoven, you see a change in subjects as compared to ten years ago. Back then, about eighty per cent of the students graduated on

product design and aesthetics, and twenty per cent focused on social issues. Now, it's the other way around. Eighty per cent graduates on themes that have to do with inventing, our relation to nature and how to work with natural materials. They think of questions like, 'What do I need?', 'Could I live in a tiny house if I cannot get a mortgage?', 'Can I grow my own crops?'. Society should listen more to which matters concern the youth.

6. MaterialDistrict's goal is to connect various parties. Which other party or person should the visitor get to know according to you, and why?

Education is the most important way to bring parties together. I often go to Russia and Ukraine lately. These countries are open to this kind of innovation, especially in the field of education and developing personal skills, and perhaps need it more than we do as well. I share my knowledge there, but I also get a lot of innovative input from the students.

The collaboration between government, education and entrepreneurs in Eindhoven is incredibly important. It was one of the tools to bring the city back from its deprivation. That collaboration was known as Triple Helix. From this collaboration, Brainport has manifested itself, which is mostly focused on entrepreneurs. But I, along with others, was allowed to decide on the relationship between education and government. I became the coordinator of a programme for the Technical University Eindhoven, titled 'The city as a laboratory'. In 2010, when there was no more money for the programme, it was transformed into a virtual university, for which no building was necessary, and knowledge could be shared over the Internet. This is what I still do. Without the need for money, I use education as collaboration to invent new things. For instance, the 60+/30- concept for cooperative housing (used for an empty school), or the WISE city concept as an answer to 'smart city'. Not only focused on technology but in balance with human needs and behaviour.

To me, that collaboration with as theme 'The city as laboratory' is a kind of tool for the future.

About the ambassador

Cees Donkers represents the sector Urban & Landscapes. Until his retirement in 2015, he was the urban architect of the city of Eindhoven, the Netherlands.

He redeveloped the neighbourhood he lives, Witte Dorp, as well as the former Philips building De Witte Dame as the start of the transformation of the former PHILIPS factories.

He helped Eindhoven shake its name as 'the ugliest city in the Netherlands' into design pearl.

Donkers also started series of open debates on the redevelopment of Eindhoven, and founded together with Technical University and Design Academy Eindhoven 'City as a Lab', a research project on urban beautification.

He is the founder the Architectural Center Eindhoven and Brabant Academy, an online platform for research in urban planning, and has received a national award of the Ministry of Urban Planning. Donkers has a large international network of start-ups and young professionals and gives lectures and workshops on urban transformation.

About MaterialDistrict

MaterialDistrict is the world's leading match-making platform in the field of innovative materials. MaterialDistrict's value as a high-end materials inspiration source is clear: R&D- and design professionals of all industries are using our platform to discover new material solutions. Daily via MaterialDistrict.com, annually at MaterialDistrict Rotterdam and periodically throughout the year with traveling MaterialDistrict Expo, MaterialDistrict Talks and MaterialDistrict Pop-Up events.

For direct contact: T +31 (0)20 713 0650