Parallel session: Creating Sustainable Cities

Cities are now often regarded as the site where the sustainability transition will have to take place. This is logical, as cities host both the largest share of the world's population and its dominant concentration of resources and opportunities.

However, the complexity of the problems facing cities has left many paralysed. The failure or irrelevance of traditional 'sectoral' forms of urban problem-solving is apparent. Calls abound for integrated development (across sectors and disciplines) and alternative modes of operation, from both urban stakeholders and policymakers.

One such alternative form is the “living lab”: an experimental and practice-based approach to urban development. Living labs are, in essence, a collaborative form of connecting research to policy making. Similarly, we see the practice of ‘research by design’ at play, driven by the conviction that solutions are found not by simplifying the problem, but rather by adding layers of complexity. Only then can we start to see — and create — new connections and opportunities that transcend our institutionalised logics and engrained ways of seeing.

“Creating Sustainable Cities” will be a ‘dry run’ of one such an endeavor. It will be an exploratory workshop, connecting research to stakeholder knowledge to think of what it takes to transform the city to fit the goals of Paris (2 degree climate target) or New York (the SDGs). Introductory presentations about urban sustainability will be brought down to earth by applying them directly a case-study of the Overvecht neighbourhood in Utrecht: a neighbourhood dealing with a vast range of social, economic, and environmental challenges.

The workshop will be spread over two sessions of one hour each. In the first hour, leading researchers in the fields of sustainable energy, healthy urban living, and social inclusivity will give introductory presentations, linking general discussions in their field to the specific case of Overvecht and opening up for discussion, also with stakeholders from the municipality and the neighborhood. In the second hour, members of the Urban Futures Studio will introduce the “living lab“ approach as a means of research that is grounded in actual localities and that works across disciplines. This will be followed by an interactive discussion to see if the living lab approach could work as an innovative and valuable tool to transform Overvecht.

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