

Transforming Cities for Sustainable Futures

The sustainability challenges that the world faces today, require a changing role from cities, and subsequently, new ways to create transformative knowledge. It starts by creating sustainable infrastructures, making use of experimentation, co-design and cross-domain assessments. We can move beyond this to investigate the broader topic of urban sustainable transformation, thereby extending the focus to include future challenges, imaginaries, transformation processes and contestations. In doing so, the Transforming Cities hub, who organised the workshop of today, makes use of transdisciplinary collaboration and takes a learning approach. One main question drove the talks and sessions of today: How can researchers, governments and citizens improve collaboration to guide urban sustainability transformations?

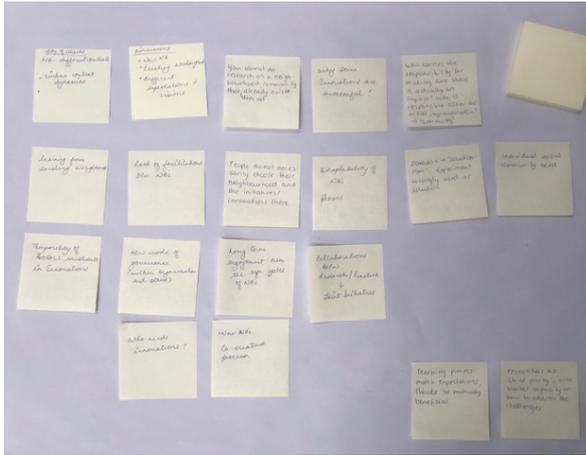
In the morning of the day-long workshop, with a transdisciplinary group of people, we worked together on approaches to urban transformations in three parallel sessions:

- Reflections on co-designing sustainable futures;
- Cross-city learning and approaches for urban sustainability transitions;
- Urban experimentation and assessments



The transdisciplinarity of the attending group as well as the speakers lead to an interesting convergence of perspectives, ideas and questions, inspired also by the unique environment of the Werkspoorcathedral. Although capturing the elaborate input of these sessions into a couple of key concepts is a challenge, I will make an attempt!

The first session made a distinction between accelerating transformations and slowing down to reconsider one's intrinsic drive and discuss collaborative and futuring tools, techniques and approaches. The second session discovered new ways of cross-fertilizing new collaborations and of aligning strategic planning with local initiatives. The role of cross-city learning and multi-city approaches was discussed. In the third session, we talked about the challenges that arise from conducting experiments and when assessing and up-scaling these neighbourhood-level innovations, using concepts like dynamic complexity, the temporality of responsibility, projectification and solutionism.



The lunch that followed was a great opportunity to meet new people, hear about new insights and lay relevant connections. In the afternoon, the groups were mixed up into two different city safaris to see urban transformations in practice. The first group could take out their umbrella for an explorative walk-shop outside, which resulted in the gathering of data in the form of discovering ‘waste’ in the landscape which can be of value now and in the future. This gathering of data, ‘relics of the future’, provided the basis for a discussion on different starting points and potential pathways towards zero-waste urban futures.

Just when the sun came out, the other group went on a tour by Ballast Nedam through the redevelopment project in the Cartesius area. Inspired by the theory of the “Blue Zones”, all kinds of innovations for achieving health and sustainability will be implemented here. This means not only creating a healthy living environment in terms of, for example, nature and biodiversity, but also nudging people towards behavioural change in terms of eating healthy food, exercising, acting sustainably and building a community.



As a last session, we discussed podcasting as an activist intervention, in a roundtable discussion initiated by AndersUtrecht. AndersUtrecht is a transdisciplinary network that aims to strengthen the cooperation between grassroots initiatives for sustainability. Next to discussing the added value of podcasting as a tool to give a voice to these initiatives, part of the dialogue focused on the diversity and vision of these initiatives. Critical questions were posed regarding the research value of the project, the transformative potential of the initiatives and the meaning of “anders” (different).



While having a nice drink and some bites together to finish the day, we came back to the research question posed in the beginning: How can researchers, governments and citizens improve collaboration to guide urban sustainability transformations? The variety of ideas and suggestions that had come up cannot be captured in one single answer, however, today a good start has been made in collaborating for sustainability.