



Input from Dutch Connection* to the organisers of the Creative Capital Conference

Introduction

We are positive about this year's Creative Capital conference. 300 people from 20 countries gathered in the heart of Amsterdam to discuss issues that govern the future "[creative capital](#)" of this country – and indeed the whole of Western Europe. In 2015, India will have more than three times more qualified scientists (60 million) than the ENTIRE Dutch population (currently 16 million). And that knowledge will cost one tenth of the price than can be found in Europe.

So is Europe, and the Netherlands in particular, destined to become the retirement home for the world, with frequent visits from Chinese tourists curious about empires of the past? A few people are waking up to the fact that something must be done if that future scenario is not going to become a reality. Already, too many intellectuals are leaving the Netherlands (both foreigners and Dutch nationals), with 2004 having the largest emigration figure (40,000) since the 2nd World War. There are more than 300,000 empty workspaces in the Amsterdam area – the IT 'Silicon Polder' area near the Amsterdam football stadium arena is a wasteland of empty offices.

Some creative people in this part of Europe tend to look to the very strong, overbearing public organizations for answers and financial handouts. Yet, these organizations are too large to be creative.

A Different Future

In good times, Amsterdam had a "West Coast" feel, just like the US West Coast. Inspiration, both creative and technological, came from a salad bowl construction...people from all kinds of background bumping into each other in the inspiring surroundings of the canals and houseboats of central Amsterdam. There was a buzz, a feeling that cool things were happening, that anything was possible and there were incentives to get things done.

Like a knife, the blade in Amsterdam has dulled. Routine has set in – as well as the Dutch desire to organize and regulate. With the routine, "norms" have been set which celebrate mediocrity, rather than reward the outstanding. Success is not celebrated in the Netherlands; it is frowned upon. And rather than get stuck in this celebration of mediocrity, younger Dutch professionals are getting the hell out of the country.

That's a hell of a shame.

But there are some lights at the end of the tunnel. In March, the conference held by the Creative Capital partners in Felix Meritis was the first time we have seen creatives, business people, academics and government get together to discuss mutual issues in a broader forum. We thought the Mayor of Amsterdam, Job Cohen, set the right tone for the meeting, speaking about what Amsterdam needs to succeed – infrastructure, tolerance and an ability to act as a catalyst for new ideas. He proffered three challenges:

- 1.) What role can a city play in the tempestuous playing field of the economy?
- 2.) What conditions should a city support and equip to create an environment of creativity?
- 3.) How can any city remain globally competitive and still be socially inclusive?

Members of the newly formed Dutch Connection got the chance to interview and debate with the keynote speakers: Stephen Graham, Pekka Himanen, Joichi Ito, Charles Landry, Charles Leadbeater and Geoff Mulgan. They revealed that the leaders of the future are coaches for society, operating on a sharing model rather than shouting and spin doctoring.

Both Amsterdam and Rotterdam seem ideally suited to becoming creative centres. Megacities are too large and complex. Those below one million can offer scale and infrastructure, but also the intimacy needed for great ideas to be discussed and developed. Europe, in general, has the potential to become a post-modern hyper-power, not by military strength but by the intellectual power to influence through attraction. It *could* be a pioneer of a new model of governance with no parallel elsewhere.

So what needs to happen?

Amsterdam, in particular, needs to stimulate a much healthier mix of ideas between academics, business and public institutions. Ultimately, the creative spaces need to be everywhere in the nation's capital and beyond into the provinces. But to start with, some centres of excellence need to get cracking on some innovative projects. Some seeds already are starting to germinate. They need to be nurtured and their growth stimulated. They will flourish by being seen as centres of excellence, providing they remain inclusive to society, not exclusive to the clubs that repeatedly copy concepts and collect the subsidies. Mediocrity, bureaucracy, closed networks and too much government subsidy will kill off the seeds of success. Public institutions need to set examples of how it is possible to be "lean, mean and ready for the future", not slow, bureaucratic and ready for re-organisation.

We're optimistic. We think that after this dark period of Dutch indecision, it could be that a tipping point has been reached.

Tangible Results?

The aim of the conference was to come up with an agenda for the Dutch government. It has to answer the question – what does Dutch society need in place in order to be creative. This [agenda](#) published by Creative Capital consists of several elements on the concept of creative cities, creative economies, and creative commons. Dutch Connection believes the document is not complete, being too much of a glossary and not enough of a working agenda. So, we have added the following points to a plan of action.

Six Action Points for the Dutch Government to be realised before December 2005

I. Create a Dutch equivalent of the UK's National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts.

- This body would invest in people and ideas. It would be an investment fund, which, like its UK counterpart, is seen to be taking risks. Not all projects funded would have to show short-term success. If an idea has potential to enrich the Netherlands, it should be supported.
- Ideas that get public funding would also be accessible to the public (including business) so that the intellectual capital remains in the community. Open access to the knowledge gained would be a key factor when supporting projects with public money. Citizens are users and producers of technology and should be provided with an open, shared infrastructure for production. This body would be seen as backing ideas that have social and cultural value, as well as just economic potential.
- This body should NOT be a gigantic public corporation, which tries to do everything from mentoring to marketing. It should simply broker between those with ideas and those with relevant expertise to realise them. It needs to be the “Google” of Dutch Creativity. It needs to coach, not control. It should be a broker to find answers, not a factory for report writing.
- This success of this body would be governed by its simplicity to stimulate new ideas and its inclusiveness of all sectors in society.
- Policy makers should recognise the social and economic importance of stimulating creative capital. It means the role of government is to stimulate and facilitate open spaces where swarms of activity will produce new concepts and ideas. It is not a pipeline where money is stuffed in at one end and great “deliverables” are shoved out at the other end.

2. **Stimulate alternatives to monopolies.** The meeting in Amsterdam coincided with international sessions of the Creative Commons movement. The Open Source movement believes that software monopolies are not only hurting European entrepreneurs, but making this entire continent very vulnerable. Government and local authorities should make clear in their tenders that they favour open source solutions and offer tax incentives for companies to develop and support stable alternatives. In many cases, it has taken 5 years for a public department to install and train their staff on a specific system. They have no incentive to change unless the open source approach can provide a clear advantage, not only in product but also in support.

The open-source preference and spirit would also extend to schools and public educational institutions. They should be encouraged to offer courses on word processing and spreadsheets not on specific products. In other words, public institutions should be platform and operating system agnostic.

3. **Public Access to the Internet.**

Many leading countries in Asia and North America are already providing public wireless Internet access across their cities. Basic access is very cheap. Those who want very fast access or special tools pay a premium. Amsterdam & Rotterdam are already being blacklisted in the US as being a “rip-off” for visitors with hotels vastly overcharging for Internet access. Yet some University campuses in the East of the Netherlands are, in effect, the largest Wi-Fi campuses in the world. Yet, no one knows. This discrepancy in access is not helping to improve the Netherlands image abroad as innovative.

4. **Public Archives.**

Public archives, both written and multi-media, should encourage the public to make active use of their collections. This means allowing users to mix and match content, providing new creations are subject to the same common licences as the originals. It costs money to store and access archives. Content financed by public funds should be made available through popular platforms and not locked up because of “copyright restrictions”.

5. **Celebrate Risk Taking.** It will prove impossible to fight “Doe Maar Gewoon” by just writing reports or forming national commissions to investigate the problem. Creating centres of excellence and activity should encourage people to excel, so as to be part of a successful future, not a mediocre present. Ambition should not be confused with arrogance.

- Create room for competent failure. Reduce the financial punishment for entrepreneurs who take risks and make mistakes. Innovation requires making mistakes. Most inventions are the result of mistakes or improvements on failures. Most of the successful entrepreneurs in the world have failed financially at least once.
- Realize that if security is the core value in The Netherlands, that this will keep us from ever achieving top performance by reaching for excellence. Remove the fear and the “can’t do” mentality. Replace it with “can do” and “must try”.
- Accept social inclusion and stop holding foreigners at the fringe of our society because they don’t fit in. Working with this “not fitting in” might be exactly what The Netherlands needs to give it a chance at taking risks. It may also stem the violence and anger and frustration – and turn it into something much more creative and solution-based.

6. **Less Talk, More Action.** Stop just endlessly talking about the same things in the same way, and start actively discussing ways to effect the change needed to grow and find the creative edge necessary to compete in an innovative climate. Next year’s conference at the end of April should pick-up where this conversation in Amsterdam left off.

***About the Dutch Connection**

The Dutch Connection is a community encouraging Business Development through Collaboration, Creativity & Culture. It is a business development club based in the Netherlands. Since the spring of 2004, groups of 15 to 20 people from a wide-range of professions have been meeting on a monthly basis.

The Dutch Connection brings together Dutch nationals and expats living and working in the Netherlands. Together they offer a unique combination of "inside-looking-out" and "outside-looking-in" perspectives on business culture in the Netherlands. This unique mix of minds also offers a large set of complementing skills and competencies anchored in collaboration, creativity and culture. More details at www.dutch-connection.net .