

Report Site Visit: **Brainpark I, Rotterdam (NL)**

Transforming the Productive City
From Monofunctional Business Area to Innovative Urban District



Site visit 'Brainpark I', with Esther Heemskerk as site representative

Photo: Frank Hanswijk

On Friday 26 April AIR and European NL organized a full day programme to introduce the five European sites in Rotterdam in depth. It was a unique opportunity to explore the five areas and meet representatives and stakeholders of each site.

SITE VISIT (morning)

EXPERTS ON SITE:

Esther Heemskerk (City of Rotterdam, urbanist)

Sjoerd Berghuis (architect at Klunder Architecten, based in Brainpark I)

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS (with Esther Heemskerk):

Q: Are all owners interested in the transformation of this area?

A: During the crisis it became clear that this monofunctional area was vulnerable to economic fluctuations. A new strategy is needed. Now Rotterdam is becoming more popular and developing this area would financially be more viable. Owners are open to talk about the possibilities for densification and to contribute to transformation. Currently the Floor Space Index is very low: 0.5. A difficult aspect in this area is that every building has a different owner, often foreign investors. Therefore, it's difficult to formulate one clear ambition strategy. Solutions for this site should therefore include strategies for cooperation as well as new typologies for this now monofunctional area.

The users of the buildings are not the owners. All offices have their own, free parking space. At the end of a workday, employees head home by car all at once, which causes traffic jams. Sound caused by traffic on the adjacent highway should be taken into account when developing housing in this area. The area is well connected to the city centre by metro, tram and roads for cars.

> Read the site brief for the official assignment: <https://www.european-europe.eu/en/session/european-15/site/rotterdam-brainpark-i-nl>



Departure of the 'Brainpark I' site visit at the neighbouring EUR campus

Photo: Frank Hanswijk

Q: Is it an option to demolish the buildings?

A: It could be an option; some owners are open to it. But it would be nice to think of other options too to increase the density and the amount of square metres, and to transform the current buildings. These typical office buildings could also be cherished as a relic of their time and be transformed in something beautiful that fits modern needs.

Q: Who owns the public space?

A: The municipality owns and maintains the public space. The land of the buildings are in most cases 'erfpacht constructies' (lease constructions).

Q: What is the status of occupation?

A: About 20-30% is vacant/not rented. This is higher than in other parts of Rotterdam. We see a growing need of office space in Rotterdam, partly because many office spaces across the city are being transformed to housing. The type of companies in this area are for instance health care practises. A list of type of companies will be added to the Complete Site Folder.



High-quality green in the 'heart' of Brainpark I

Photo: Frank Hanswijk

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS (with Sjoerd Berghuis):

Q: Why is your office located at Brainpark I?

A: It is close to the highway, easy to reach by car for employees, but also for clients. And there is free parking space available on the plot. An office location in the city centre will take an extra 20 minutes to reach. We have lots of meetings outside the city; we can easily go there from here. We are the only architecture firm in this area, I don't understand why, it is a very convenient location. Public transport (metro) is very close as well. The green area is great we go out quite often to have lunch outdoors. Sometimes we have lunch at the EUR Campus. More places to have lunch (or diner) on site would be a nice addition though.

Q: What would you change in this area?

A: At night the area is completely empty, no one has to be here, because it is only working area. Mixed use would help to create a more vibrant area at all times of the day. The existing water and green structures are unique. But because of the noise of the highway we don't work outside on the balcony. The new houses could be positioned adjacent the park, and offices could be high-rise positioned adjacent the highway forming a buffer. The parking solution could be collective as well, shared as one big solution for all offices. Nearby there are many sports areas, which is convenient for housing developments. The desired North-South

connection will support new developments in this area even more. And more activities on the ground floors of the buildings would open up the space and create more liveliness at different times during the day.

Q: Are other users of the area involved in the development of a strategy? And if so, what is the timeline for this process?

A: We aim to come up with a collective strategy before summer, but we might not reach this deadline because of everyone's busy schedule. As an architect, I have ideas on how to develop this area, which I share as a tenant on this site. I am not involved as the official architect for this area. I think high-rise could really help to turn this area into an eye catcher for Rotterdam, as gateway to the city. However, currently this area is not in the high-rise zone of Rotterdam, so buildings cannot be taller than 70 metres.



Architect Sjoerd Berghuis about working in Brainpark I / Public transport hub Kralingse Zoom next to Brainpark I

Photo: Frank Hanswijk

WORKSHOP (afternoon)

EXPERTS:

Esther Heemskerk (City of Rotterdam, urbanist)
André Kempe (moderator, European NL board)

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS:

Q: How does Brainpark relate to the EUR Campus?

A: At the EUR Campus there are a lot of concrete buildings on the campus. It is a green area with monumental buildings in it. South of the strip, the campus area is very dense. Quite some student housing has been added, and there are plans to add even more since Rotterdam needs this type of housing. In the neighbourhood Kralingen nearby, there is already 12% student housing. In Brainpark I, currently a monofunctional office area, the aim is to create different types of housing – student housing, friends concept, student hotels, etc. – as well. The target group can be broader as the typology allows this. Brainpark was built to be in contact with the campus (the name says a lot, Brainpark/Braincampus), but except for the Hogeschool Rotterdam, there is no common activity now. They are two separated worlds. More interaction would be nice; keeping the offices, while introducing a programmatic mix. In mornings and early evenings, the area is very busy. There are many crossings for pedestrians; students walk to bus stops and the metro station Kralingse Zoom nearby. Users of Brainpark use mainly the cars and are bothered by all these pedestrians. They slow down the car traffic and cause traffic jams in busy mornings.

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Q: How does this project site relate to Rivium in Capelle (other side of the highway)?

A: Rivium was a business area with a lot more vacancy than Brainpark. There were more warehouses and logistics. Now a lot of houses are added in that area; 10% of the total housing capacity of Capelle is in Rivium. The mobility strategy is very important there, as well as the view on Rotterdam. The popularity of Rotterdam reflects there. The shuttle bus connects it well. But there are much bigger plots than Brainpark.

Q: Where can you build? What are the consequences of noise by the highway?

A: In the site brief you'll find the restriction areas. Too much noise is unhealthy in a housing environment. Therefore, a smart solution for housing is needed. This area will not be an exception in terms of allowed heights outside the high-rise area. But relative taller buildings in front of the highway could, for instance, be a solution.

Q: We want to create more mixed functions, but it is close to the highway; is the area ready?

A: There is sound and air pollution; sound is the biggest problem. The starting point is to increase density, and not to transform all offices to housing. Where can you add housing in between? What do you knock down? It is a generic office area, we see those a lot, but the green space is really unique for an office site like this.

Q: What is important to keep in the design?

A: The green structure is important. And it would be interesting to add character. Demolishment could happen, but a clear strategy is needed. Ground prices depend on the type of contracts with the owners. If we allow to build higher, ground prices will rise. Low prices could stimulate transformation. This area is outside the high-rise zone of the city, so the maximum building height is 70 metres. In transformation we are looking for medium-rise.

Q: Are there restrictions on percentage to build on a plot?

A: There are restrictions to the height of the buildings, since the area is outside the appointed high-rise areas. The programme depends per building plot.

Q: Which target groups is the municipality aiming to attract to this area?

A: Vision on attracting target groups in Rotterdam in general: 20% lower incomes – 20 % middle incomes – 30 % higher incomes. For now, the same guidelines count for Brainpark I.



Photo: Frank Hanswijk

Q: Who owns the land?

A: The ownership of the ground depends per building plot. The land is not always owned by the municipality. Some plots are bought, some are leased. A balance has to be found in finding a strategic vision or other possibilities in ownership, making it flexible. The owners of the buildings are not the users, but often foreign investors. This is already a transition; the land is sold and bought, and there are different owners now than a couple of years ago. Currently, there are about 12 different owners, but it is changing fast. Vacancy is 20-30%. Some buildings need to be renovated, other already are. In general, the buildings don't have a long-life expectancy. The municipality will never buy the land and develop by itself; collaboration with private parties is always needed. Unification of owners and municipality would be interesting. The owners need stimulating plans to see the possible future of this area, European could provide that. Now the municipality is getting to know the owners during first talks about the possible transformation. This process started recently. All owners unified could still be possible, a collective solution is always better for an area. Now the area is individualized, collectiveness would be a big gain. Make this potential visible in the design.

Q: Owners are alright with redevelopment, but do they agree with a mixed programme?

A: Now the site is monofunctional, which makes it vulnerable. A more divers area is more resilient, sustainable. The owners want mixed use as well as the users; they like additional functions in the area like lunch places (not only at the campus).

Q: Who are the current renters of Brainpark?

A: Densifying is important, but existing tenants are important as well. The redevelopment strategy has to be created together. Rivium is replacing tenants, but we can think about collaboration. A list of tenants will be added to the Complete Site Folder.

Q: When was the zoning plan renewed last?

A: Not sure which date. The current zoning plan restricts density; the area is not very dense, that needs to change when redeveloping. The existing buildings are 15-35 meters high. The hotel is the only exception. However, don't let the existing zoning plan restrict the future plans for design, they can change. The municipality owns the public space. The areas directly around the buildings are private car parks.

Q: Can clear building zones be provided?

A: There are no detailed rules concerning building measures on this site. There are no clear street patterns and 'rooilijnen' (red lining) etc. We are looking for an attractive and strong concept. The rules cannot be provided in detail and, more importantly, this is not relevant for the European design competition.

Q: When will the North-South connection be built?

A: The bridge could be built on two potential locations: this site in Rotterdam or in Krimpen. One of the aims is to make the Van Brienenoord bridge less busy. A lot of cars have a local destination. An additional bridge will solve this problem. The new bridge is of national interest, so it is being built with budget of the national government. Obviously, we hope that will be realized in Rotterdam, instead of Krimpen, but it has not been decided yet.

Q: How does the metro connect this area?

A: Kralingse Zoom metro station contains a 'park and ride'. Park for free if you buy a metro ticket. This stimulates people not to enter the city with a car. A shuttle bus connects Capelle, this is the only public transport connection. It has its own tracks, no driver, it drives automatic, and it is a touristic attraction as well.

Q: How is Brainpark connected to the European sites in the West of the city?

A: There is no direct relation. You can take the metro to the city centre, and productivity is already present at Brainpark. There is no direct link needed with the M4H area. Brainpark is more knowledge based, there is more production.

Q: We saw sheep in the south of Brainpark. What characterizes this part of the area? And are there plans to develop this part as well?

A: There are a Jewish cemetery, sport clubs, some housing and the Leonidas hockey terrain. In the near future it will stay like this. But the planned new bridge will 'land' there, for cars, pedestrians and bikes. On the south side, Feyenoord City developments will start soon with a new stadium and housing. So, the new North-South connection will probably become busy.

Q: Is underground parking a possibility?

A: Ground conditions are difficult which makes underground parking very expensive. The advice for design and build would be to avoid it. However, the municipality wants to stimulate underground parking. Integrate parking in the design, but also other smart mobility solutions. The aim is to look for new ways to solve the car issues and make cars less dominant in the area. A suggestion could be a temporary parking building that could transform to other functions over time.

Q: Is car ownership rising or lowering in Rotterdam?

A: In the last years we notice an increase of bikes and pedestrians, cars is more or less the same over the last couple years. However, this depends per area. Parking policy in general: the nearer you build near a station, the less car parking you need,

Q: Are there water related problems to consider in Brainpark?

A: Not a lot of problems, since it is a quite high area; it is above sea level. A dam was built, like a 'terp', it goes up, so the area is on a small hill. There are height differences within the site as well.

DOCUMENTS ADDED TO THE COMPLETE SITE FOLDER:

- List of types of companies/tenants
- Specific numbers student housing in Rotterdam

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS:

- Tour: 25
- Workshop: 15

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