Between promise and practice

*Exploring the politics of urban food strategies in European cities*

Cretella, A.

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The discussion of the London case highlighted how various urban developments and policy arrangements (in this case, particularly the 2012 London Olympics) can influence the content and agenda of UFS-related policy efforts. Since such cross-fertilization may account for discrepancies between promises and practices in UFSs, this begs for a closer investigation. This chapter introduces the second case study, of the Rotterdam food strategy. In search for both ‘alternative’ and ‘economic’ (neoliberal) dynamics, the chapter offers an analysis of the content of two food-related policy documents produced by the municipality: the Sustainability Program and the strategic agenda Food and the City. The analysis lays bare how a broader urban agenda influences the implementation of the food strategy. Particularly, Rotterdam’s city branding and ‘creative’ ambitions influence its UFS, which leads me to conclude that an assimilation of a food strategy is a form of creative city politics. The chapter concludes that each UFSs seeks different objectives and is subjective to all kinds of context-related influences. Such differentiation, I argue, is ultimately not compatible with the generic labelling of ‘alternative’.
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4 — Food as creative city politics in the city of Rotterdam

Abstract

This paper investigates the emerging importance of food and Urban Agriculture in the city of Rotterdam. In particular these themes are the focus of two policy documents recently launched by the municipality: the Sustainability Program and the strategic agenda Food and the City. In the process of rebranding the city for middle and upper class residents and creative workers, these strategies directly contribute to the marketing of Rotterdam as the most “sustainable world harbor city”. By way of discourse analysis, we analyze policy documents to highlight the tensions between the advertised social and economic benefits of these operations. Food and Urban Agriculture emerges as being framed to target the needs of the low-income multicultural population, and at the same time of the upper and creative class. The paper concludes that municipal experiments on food can be used strategically to foster competition and city-branding; as such these can ultimately be considered a form of creative city politics.

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15 Agnese Cretella conceived of the presented idea, developed the theoretical framework and analysis, wrote the manuscript and took the pictures displayed in the article. Mirjam Stella Buenger translated relevant policy documents from Dutch to English and was encouraged by Agnese Cretella to investigate the topic for her BSc thesis. Agnese Cretella supervised the findings and included selected extracts to the present contribution.
4.1 Introduction: The drive towards urban food governance

Food provision, and its implications for issues such as sustainability, social justice and economic development, is nowadays a subject for discussion in various political arenas. Food scholars have paid particular attention to the role of cities, where for many reasons the food system requires the most urgent action (Pothukuchi and Kaufman 1999, Steel 2009, Morgan 2015). One of the commonest arguments to support this sense of urgency comes from the UN report *World Urbanization Prospects: The 2011 Revision*, which indicates that population growth will become a largely urban phenomenon, predicting that by 2015 67% of the world population will live in urban areas. In more developed countries, the percentage of urban dwellers is estimated to amount to 86% by 2050. Moreover, it is estimated that “cities consume 75% of the world’s resources and produce 80% of CO₂ emissions” (Pisano, Lepuschitz et al. 2014, p.6). These figures indicate the need to deal with the impacts of food production, transportation and consumption in urban settings, which will become ever more important.

Alongside concerns for the growing population, access to healthy food makes a substantial contribution to human wellbeing. Today, globalized food supply chains make it possible to meet the high demand for food in urban areas. However, various problems arise with regard to the agro-industrial food supply chain, including environmental degradation, increased health risks, and outbreaks of foodborne diseases (Motarjemi and Käferstein 1999).

In response to these issues, local food production and consumption has been promoted as a way to facilitate access to fresher, more nutritious and therefore healthier food (Feenstra 1997, Brunori 2007), whilst helping to reduce “food miles”, the distance that food travels to reach the consumer’s plate (Lang 2006). In recent years, various organizations, consumer groups, and food movements have been actively advocating for the establishment of more regional and local food supply chains in cities (Holt Gimenez and Shattuck 2011, Just Food 2014).

The ethics of these movements have been especially built around the promotion of sustainability and social justice, framed in opposition to the *global*, understood as the economic logic of capitalism (Miele, Murdoch et al. 2004, DuPuis and Goodman 2005).

Especially in the cities of the Global North, a strong sense of activism is associated with the practices following from this renewed interest in local food, as for instance for the many projects recently mushrooming around Urban Agriculture (UA). As defined by Mougeot, UA is “the growing, processing, and distribution of food and nonfood plant
and tree crops and the raising of livestock, directly for the urban market, both within and on the fringe of an urban area” (Mougeot and Centre 2006, p.4). Although distinctions can be made between intra-urban and peri-urban agriculture, for the purpose of this research the definition will be limited to the scale of intra-urban agriculture taking place within city limits. Concrete examples of how UA can take place in cities are offered by Pearson et al. (2010), who distinguish between urban agricultural practices on different scales. At the micro level UA is practiced on green roofs and walls as well as in backyards and on roadsides. At the meso level UA takes place in community gardens, individual allotments and urban parks. Commercial farms, nurseries and greenhouses are forms of macro scale UA. At all three scales public, private or cooperative forms of ownership co-exist, with different intentions.

It is relatively recently that municipalities started recognizing the role that food and UA can play in sustainable urban development, and they are creating ad hoc policies that are slowly giving legitimation to the many grassroots, private or public practices and organizations active around food in cities. This is especially evident in Europe and North America, where under various names and structures, there has been much experimentation. The goal of these new urban food policies has been understood as aiming at integrating “different policy domains and objectives that are (in)directly linked to food, such as improving human health, youth education, environmental quality, quality of life, employment and social justice and cohesion” (Wiskerke 2009, p.380).

In European cities, the urban food strategies model has gained particular success among other types of food policies. The Rough Guide to Sustainable Food Systems defines them “as a process consisting of how a city envisions change in its food system, and how it strives towards this change” (Moragues, Morgan et al. 2013, p.6). On the way towards a strategic document, charters and action plans are developed in order to construct a step by step implementation of food policies. In practice, urban food strategies realize their objectives by all sorts of initiatives within the city: support for farmers’ markets, food festivals, public food procurement, educational projects and support for UA are a few of the concrete outputs of a food strategy. To a certain extent, these municipal strategies have helped to bring discourses and practices that previously formed part of the “belief system” of food activists and movements into the mainstream. This has certainly played a part in the construction of the radical, alternative image of institutional food initiatives, which are implicitly seen as redistributive and social policies, and presumably in opposition to neoliberal agendas. Indeed, the literature on urban food strategies and policies reflects a widely positive
understanding of the role that these can play in connection with urban development, planning and local communities (Fairchild and Morgan 2007, Reynolds 2009, Sonnino 2009, Mah and Thang 2012). Compared to the positive effects that all these experiments could have (e.g. reduction of CO₂ emissions, reduction of diet-related disease, community-building, mitigating heat island effects, better access to healthy and fresh food and wellbeing), little research has been done on their latent political tensions and contradictions.

In this sense, the drive towards food governance in European cities is certainly related to urban development politics around the “sustainable city”. Within the latter, improving both the social and environmental dimensions of urban living has become a primary goal, allegedly upstream with the more pressing agendas on economic growth and competitiveness typical of the “entrepreneurial city”. Although these two models of urban governance have often been framed in opposition to each other, the line between the two is becoming increasingly blurred, and urban scholars begin to question if “the pursuit of social sustainability [is] simply a legitimization strategy for cities, which are otherwise engaged in economic and cultural transformation designed to promote competitiveness” (Jonas and While 2007, p.130).

More specifically, the economic and city-branding aspects of institutionalized food initiatives have so far been completely overlooked by food scholars. While focusing on how food policies have succeeded in increasing urban sustainability or “beautification”, researchers tend to forget that the actual consequences of improving a city’s image are often uneven, as for instance attracting new residents from the white middle class, while displacing working class residents or migrants. The risk is therefore that rather than creating wellbeing and a better living environment for the whole community, these projects become neoliberal urban development strategies, which ultimately lead to reinforcing or creating spaces of exclusion (McClintock 2013).

In this paper we call for a more cautious approach to the way urban food policies and strategies are understood within the many scholarly discourses that are emerging around them. Tornaghi (2014) has advocated a critical approach to the analysis of these initiatives by placing them “in the context of specific sociopolitical (and food) regimes, and investigating the role that they play in the reproduction of capitalism, in the transformation of urban metabolic processes, and in the discursive, political and physical production of new socio-environmental conditions” (ibid. 553). Rather than insisting on the benefits of these practices, this paper focuses instead on how the discourses around food and community projects can be used strategically by
policymakers and speculators to foster processes of neo-liberalization in the practice of urban development (Rosol 2012).

In particular, this paper tests how the discourses around food and UA have been developed and framed by policymakers in the Dutch city of Rotterdam. Two policy documents are analyzed: the Rotterdam food strategy, *Food and the city: stimuleren van stadslandbouw in en om Rotterdam* (Food and the City: stimulating urban agriculture in and around Rotterdam) (Gemeente Rotterdam 2012) and the *Programma Duurzaam: investeren in duurzame groei* (Sustainability Program: Investing in sustainable growth)16 (Gemeente Rotterdam 2011). While these documents show a strong focus on inclusion, health, and social cohesion as primary goals, questions of economic growth, spatial quality and competiveness are also addressed. We will critically assess these objectives in comparison with the ones developed for the Rotterdam Urban Vision in 2007, the *Stadsvisie: Spatial Development Strategy 2030*, which sets the growth objectives for the city until 2030 (Gemeente Rotterdam 2007).

This study does not pretend to test the effectiveness of these policies or judge the quality of any of their related projects. Nor have the opinions of individual policymakers or stakeholders been sought. On the contrary, the ideas, the language and the concepts contained in policy documents are taken as a direct expression of the desires, ambitions and objectives of the city of Rotterdam. Similarly, it will also be crucial to locate what is not contained in the documents, what has been repressed, and what is taken for granted in them.

By dissecting policy documents we will argue that the combination of a food strategy and the institutionalization of UA projects has been used by the Rotterdam municipality not only to address the environmental and social problems aforementioned, but also as a tool to enhance economic development, to increase real estate value, and to attract middle class citizens. In this sense, theories on the rise of the *creative class* (Florida 2007) and of *creative cities politics* (Landry 2008) will be used as theoretical lenses to understand what kind of redevelopment Rotterdam is seeking for itself. We will attempt to guide this process of understanding by unpacking the political rationality which is actually driving the physical and social reconstructing of Rotterdam, and by comparing the different discourses presented in policy documents and in other sources.

16 Authors’ translation
4.2 Methodology

We developed our analysis starting from the definition of discourse given by Hajer and Versteeg: “an ensemble of ideas, concepts and categories through which meaning is given to social and physical phenomena, and which is produced and reproduced through an identifiable set of practices” (Hajer and Versteeg 2005, p.175). In this context, written documents are key sources, allowing us to test the recurrence of specific terms, syntactic structures, and stylistic features, in order to map the dominance of certain discourses over others, and their influence and diffusion among various institutional contexts.

Thus, discourse analysis of environmental politics will be used to recognize dominant patterns within the policy documents dealing with food and UA in Rotterdam. We will assess our case within the four different angles of analysis developed by Hajer and Versteeg. First, it is assumed that reality is shaped by language, which implies that reality is socially constructed, meaning that “nature is not something out there, but a culturally appropriated concept” (ibid., p.178). In this sense UA is seen as a culturally defined practice, which also takes on different meanings in different cultural contexts.

Second, a discourse shapes what can be thought and what cannot be thought, which leads to an exclusion of other meanings. In this way, a discourse can “serve as a precursor to policy outcomes” (ibid., p.178), limiting the options to only those ideas and practices that are part of the dominant discourse. Identifying a discourse on food policies, or UA in particular, can help to uncover which political strategies gain hold in a certain context and which other meanings are neglected.

Third, policies should always be considered as cultural politics, as these are often made with a cultural bias which is constructed through political language. However, the very same language is susceptible to appropriation (rather than rejection) by the “actors who see their interests threatened by established or emerging discourses” (ibid., p.178). In other words, it is a widespread mechanism that new narratives are incorporated to serve different political goals. In the present study we will explore how, and if, the social benefits of UA are strategically used to justify other developments, which might even be working in an opposite ideological direction.

To conclude, a discourse analysis can identify language practices as a means of disciplining society. This last point refers to a Foucauldian understanding of governance, which implies that government strategies are aimed at disciplining and civilizing citizens according to a dominant logic (Van Melik and Lawton 2011). At the same time the concept of governmentality also reveals a shift in responsibility from
the state to citizens “whereby the state empowers the individual citizen to make choices based on good information provided by the state” (Hajer and Versteeg 2005, p.180). Food policies and UA can easily be analyzed in this sense as a shift in responsibilities, or as an attempt to activate and civilize certain groups in a society.

To get an insight into the political discourse on the Rotterdam Food Strategy, the economic and social objectives of the policy documents Food and the City and the Sustainability Program will be analyzed. Even though social and economic objectives are not strictly separated in practice, they are used here as analytical categories which help to distinguish between two different discourses.

Economic criteria are linked to a neoliberal logic, which adheres to the dominance of the market with little government involvement and increased levels of privatization. The outsourcing of formerly public services to private companies and social organizations is therefore part of the economic paradigm. Furthermore, the core principle of the dominant economic paradigm is competitiveness; with regard to cities, this also means competing to attract the most talented and creative people (Florida 2007). Becoming more attractive as a city, or district, increases the real estate value of the area and thus yields economic benefits. More broadly, the creation of paid jobs and services as well as the establishment of new business and extended markets are parts of the economic discourse.

In opposition to the latter, a social discourse is usually constructed to seek reduction of inequalities among social classes, to fight marginalization in different city districts, as well as to pursue inclusivity and social cohesion. With regard to UA and food, social aspects also encompass the reconnection of all people (regardless of social class) with their food, with resulting benefits in health, nutrition, and city climate.

4.3 Rotterdam’s “creative” turn

Urban food strategies have spread very rapidly all over the Netherlands in the last couple of years. After Amsterdam, which was the first Dutch city to develop a food strategy in 2007 (Dingemans 2012), the same model has been adopted by the cities of Amersfoort, Arnhem, Aphen aan de Rijn, Den Haag, Deventer, Groningen, Haarlem, Leiden, Oss, Rotterdam, Tilburg and Utrecht (Cretella 2016).

The area encompassing the four biggest cities of the Netherlands (Amsterdam, Utrecht, The Hague and Rotterdam) is called the Randstad, and is one of the largest

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17 We will explain Florida’s concept of creative class in the next section.
economic urban regions in the European Union. As well as being in competition with other big economic conurbations such as Paris, Milan and London, the Randstad is also affected by internal rivalries. Amsterdam and Rotterdam, for instance, have a longstanding competitive relationship rooted in Dutch urban culture. While Rotterdam, with its big harbor, has always had an image of an industrial and working class city, Amsterdam has kept its leadership position in the region as the cultural capital, and as the favorite residential destination of the upper class.

The connection between the upper class and a culturally vibrant urban environment has even been the object of a political strategy for the city of Amsterdam, which launched the *Broedplaatsenbeleid* (breeding grounds policy) in 2000. A perfect example of creative city politics, the *Broedplaatsenbeleid* devotes public spending to the purchase of vacant buildings, which are sold or leased at subsidized prices to artists in order to guarantee that the creative and alternative spirit of the city does not vanish:

“Because of the recent developments in the property market, it is becoming increasingly difficult to run affordable home/work premises. Artists and alternative entrepreneurs experience this problem when trying to find a place in the city. The subculture, one of the most important foundations for the city’s creative image, is being squeezed out as a result” (City of Amsterdam, 2003 in Shaw 2005, p. 161).

Unlike Amsterdam, Rotterdam has not yet delivered an ad hoc policy focused specifically on subsidizing its subculture, but its high percentage of vacant buildings and lower prices for housing have spontaneously attracted many alternative initiatives to the city. This characteristic has been key for the city to approach the *creative city* trend: Mayer (2013) elaborates that urban governments “discovered cultural revitalization and creativity-led economic and urban development as a useful strategy to enhance their brand and improve their global image” (2013, p.11).

In that regard, over the years Rotterdam has adopted various strategies to promote itself culturally, attempting to become more attractive to the upper and middle classes. Such endeavors have been translated into policy and planning in various ways. For instance Rotterdam won the bid to become the *European City of Culture* for the year 2001, but the overall experience was not very successful in terms of rebranding the city as a cultural hub (Richards and Wilson 2004).

Another interesting development is the rebranding of Rotterdam as the architectural capital of the Netherlands. Today the city hosts hundreds of architectural firms, while its impressive skyline gives it a modern and futuristic appearance. The design of a new Rotterdam is also an expression of the need for a new identity, built on the rejection of
its old cultural legacy. The result of this operation is that Rotterdammers themselves are losing their connection with the city’s historical past. A survey conducted in 2003 showed that 65% of Rotterdam citizens believe that the Erasmus Bridge over the Nieuwe Maas (opened in 1996) is so called because Erasmus built it, and did not know the bridge was actually named after this 16th-century Dutch humanist (Van Remundt 2011).

In the context of this fast transition, the Stadsvisie (urban vision) (Gemeente Rotterdam 2007) defined the city’s spatial development strategy for the next 23 years, until 2030. The document is built around the idea that Rotterdam is lagging behind compared to other cities in the Randstad region, because of selective “negative” migration of young skilled labor and as a result of the less developed knowledge economy:

“In summary, we propose that Rotterdam, as part of the Randstad, should follow a strategy directed to the development of the knowledge and service economy on the one hand; and on the other hand be concerned with the creation of an attractive living environment for highly skilled, creative workers and middle or high income groups. This strategy is necessary to play a significant role in the international competition between urban regions” (ibid., 43; authors’ translation).

In order to keep its role as an important and competitive city in the Randstad region, the Stadsvisie of Rotterdam formulates the following mission statement: “work towards a strong economy and attractive residential city” (ibid., 4). In line with this mission, the document further emphasizes the need to focus on attracting creative and highly educated workers, and middle or higher income groups, next to the development of the knowledge and service sector. The fact that in addition to the Stadsvisie, several other policy documents are also available in English might be part of a strategy to attract international experts and businesses to the city.

Such an operation clearly fits the creative class competition for talents theorized by Florida (2007). Florida states that “competition revolves around a central axis: a nation’s ability to mobilize, attract and retain human creative talent” (2007, p.3).\textsuperscript{18} In order to win this competition for talent, cities have to develop the kind of environment positively evaluated by creative people, which the author synthesizes into the "three

\textsuperscript{18} In Florida’s perspective, the creative class largely matches the higher and middle class income groups. However, his perspective ignores the increasing economic precariousness of freelancers and knowledge workers, and overlooks the important contribution of the poor and lower classes to the creative economy (Wilson and Keil 2008).
T's" index: talent, tolerance and technology. In short, cities need to create “urban environments that are open, diverse, dynamic and cool” (Peck 2005, p.740) in order to attract the creative class and survive in today’s economic competition.

The problem with creative environments that are built around art, music, and self-managed communities is that they take on an ambiguous role, since they mark certain places as attractive. This attractiveness is ultimately transformed by urban speculators into economic capital. While such a mechanism can be beneficial for the competitiveness of a city, the risk is that the “urban outcasts”, including “communities of colour, informal workers, austerity victims and urban rioters”, are pushed further to the outskirts of the city (Mayer 2013, p.11).

In this perspective, the idea expressed within the Stadsvisie of “making the city more attractive” for the creative class will be used as a starting point in the analysis of the municipal documents around food, UA and sustainability. The hypothesis is that the food related initiatives developed following the Stadsvisie have been influenced primarily by the goal of stopping the “negative migration” of upper and middle class residents. Little attention has been given to exploring the contribution of the creative class to the newly born aesthetic of the local, sustainable, organic movements, and how all of these contribute to big and small developments in cities. Thus, the municipal policy documents produced about food and UA will be analyzed as part of the strategy of attracting that specific sector of the population, consequently at the expense of low income and low-skilled communities. In this regard, the policy documents developed in Rotterdam around food do not see any contradictions or tensions between the two types of communities. On the contrary, the documents employ a political language capable of targeting the creative class, while being primarily advertised as tools to integrate low income groups.

4.4 Rotterdam’s “green” turn

In the last decade, Rotterdam was able to produce an impressive amount of cross-cutting policy documents, strategies, and visions aiming to re-launch the image of the city both nationally and internationally. Soon after the Stadsvisie in 2007, the municipality developed a set of documents focusing on sustainability, green spaces, urban agriculture and food. The Programma Duurzaam: investeren in duurzame groei (Sustainability Program: Investing in sustainable growth)19 (Gemeente Rotterdam 2011) (fig. 2) showed the first reference to food and Urban Agriculture presented as a

19 Authors’ translation
policy objective. Only one year later, with the document *Food and the city: stimuleren van stadslandbouw in en om Rotterdam* (Food and the City: stimulating urban agriculture in and around Rotterdam) (Gemeente Rotterdam 2012) (fig. 3) the city delivered its food strategy, with a strong focus on UA. The launch of the strategy has been considered an achievement not only for the municipality, but also for the plethora of large and small organizations working on food matters within the city.

Figure 1: The cover page of the “Investing in sustainable growth”, “Sustainability Program” (authors’ translation). City of Rotterdam — Gemeente Rotterdam (2011).
As a matter of fact, a food trend is very visible in Rotterdam, documented in a special edition of the professional journal *Groen: vakblad voor ruimte in stad en landschap* (Green: magazine for space in the city and countryside), which gives a multifaceted overview of the various grassroots and entrepreneurial initiatives dealing with food and UA in the city (Fontein, La Riviere et al. 2013). In the last six years, neighborhood gardens and semi-commercial gardens started to emerge under the heading of UA. Organizations such as *Eetbaar Rotterdam* (Edible Rotterdam), *Rotterdamse Oogst* (Rotterdam Harvest) and Transition Towns Rotterdam were among the first groups promoting UA. The association *Eetbaar Rotterdam* started as a network of professionals and food enthusiasts whose interest is “to gather and spread knowledge in the field of urban agriculture” (ibid., 28), with the purpose of making the food chain visible again in the city. The main objective of the organization Rotterdamse Oogst is to reinforce the local food chain by organizing various activities including a big harvest festival (photo 1). Transition Towns is “an international movement of villages, districts, towns and cities that want to become independent of long supply lines as much as possible” (ibid., 28). In Rotterdam, Transition Towns foster the exchange of knowledge on UA though film events, discussions, and the provision of information on the internet. It is
especially through these organizations’ engagement that UA has become a “hot topic” on Rotterdam’s political agenda (Oorschot 2013). At the same time, this mechanism highlights how food and UA have been the object of a cultural trend, and how its discursive power was capable of making it a vehicle of policy objectives: “UA is no longer a hobby issue but is becoming part of the whole society [...] and we want to illustrate how broad the development of UA is in Rotterdam” (Fontein, La Riviere et al. 2013, p.2).

The organization Eetbaar Rotterdam sees an opportunity in UA as trademark for a sustainable city, which also comes to the fore in policy documents like the Sustainability Program and the strategic agenda Food and the City; both documents show that the multidimensional approach of UA provides several opportunities to contribute to urban sustainable development. The Sustainability Program of 2011 describes ten tasks that will be carried out by 2014 in order to make the city more sustainable, whereas only six tasks concern the greening of the city. Specifically UA is mentioned as a means to achieve more urban green spaces, which positively contributes to health, heat reduction, and water retention (Gemeente Rotterdam 2011). However it is only with the agenda Food and the City that an explicit focus on support for UA is presented by the municipality. The concrete actions to support UA are built around three main objectives: health, a sustainable economy, and the quality of the urban environment.
Moreover, institutional commitment to food has not stopped at the production of policy documents. Since 2010 a think tank on UA has been advising the alderman for Sustainability, Inner City and Outdoor Space (Gemeente Rotterdam 2012), while the establishment of a Regional Food Council in 2013 ensures that stakeholders in the whole supply chain get a say in regional food polices (Oorschot 2013). However, political opinions on the relevance of policies supporting UA in Rotterdam diverge. While Alexandra van Huffelen, alderman for Sustainability, Inner City and Outdoor Space, has become an enthusiastic supporter, Jan-Willem Verheij (part of the parliamentary group from 2010 until 2014) does not consider this a topic for municipal politicians to address because he does not see any additional benefit in terms of food provisioning (Verheij 2012). The fact that much fresh food is produced in the immediate surroundings of Rotterdam supports his point, because there is no need to increase local food provision; however, a counterargument would be that policies on UA do not simply aim to support local food production, but also have other aims such as health, a sustainable economy and the quality of urban environments. In this regard, the municipality of Rotterdam defines UA as food production both within (intra-urban) and around (peri-urban) the city (Oorschot 2013). Support for peri-urban agriculture should stimulate interaction between farmers, consumers, business and retailers in and around the city. While the reconnection of farmers and consumers is already on its way in various forms in the city, (Boereninzicht 2014, Rechtstreex 2014) much of the attention within the municipal policy documents is actually given to intra-urban agriculture.

The unique feature of UA in Rotterdam lies, according to the municipality, in the combination of social initiatives and entrepreneurship that gives rise to multifaceted forms of UA. Projects which have been realized include social initiatives by housing corporations, neighbourhood gardens, a roof garden, commercial UA businesses in the city, better facilities in farms in the surroundings of Rotterdam, and edible greens in public spaces (Oorschot 2013). To finance professionals who can take the lead in establishing UA projects, money needs to be made available either through funding or through market opportunities. Funding is obtained in various ways; examples include funds for artistic or societal purposes, but also budgets for livability and neighborhood development that are provided by housing corporations. Van der Schans (2013) notes that social and commercial elements have become intertwined in many projects; he regards this development as positive because in this way UA becomes a means for economic development of the region. Projects which have a social setup, but also gain income through the market, are for example Hotspot Hutspot and Rotterdamse Munt (Rotterdamse Munt, Hotspot Hutspot). The former provides opportunities for
children to work in a vegetable garden and learn how to prepare and cook a balanced meal with fresh vegetables, which is then served in a local restaurant for a symbolic price (Vanhouwaert 2013). *Rotterdamse Munt* teaches women in the district of Rotterdam Zuid (a problematic neighborhood) how to grow herbs which are then sold to various restaurants in the city.

The municipality’s role in these projects is usually that of a facilitator, leaving the actual implementation in the hands of volunteer citizens or professionals (Bronsveld 2013). The same applies to the city council’s role within the *Sustainability Program* and the strategic agenda *Food and the City* on UA. Rather than allocating consistent funding and organizing brand new original initiatives, the municipality supports projects or initiatives already happening within the city. As a result of this mechanism, people working for projects and organizations involved in food feel more validated in their endeavors, while transaction costs are decreased as a consequence of the volunteer labor force involved.

The culmination of municipality investments in transforming Rotterdam into a city of food and architecture is the *Markthal* (photo 2), a brand new residential and commercial building provided with an indoor market hall. The building was designed by Rotterdam based architectural firm MVRDV and the complex hosts more than 200 apartments, thousands of square metres of retail and catering spaces, plus 1200 parking lots (Markthal). The municipality itself was the institutional partner, and marketed the project as a service for the residents. However, several criticisms arose with regard to the economic affordability of both food and housing within the complex. Van Veelen and Özdil (2014) define the Markthal as “the cathedral for hipsters in the neoliberal era” and “the symbol of a historic clusterfuck of gentrification, segregation, and neoliberalism; fake authenticity, sustained by reverent journalism. A vulgar shopping mall packed as spiritual experience” (authors’ translation).

In this regard, the critical perspective of van Veelen and Özdil on the Markthal is an expression of a broader debate emerging on the western “alternative” food movements. These have been particularly criticized for being exclusively a white middle class movement, excluding other types of narratives (Alkon and Agyeman 2011). Low income communities cannot buy the diet that is advocated by the dominant alternative food movement, which is striving for local and sustainable food systems. Alkon and Agyeman also suggest that the alternative food movement is becoming a monoculture, consisting of likeminded people with a similar background and similar
values, coming to “similar conclusions about how our food system should change” (ibid., 3).

The tension between programs for people on low incomes and creative city policies encompasses the official strategic documents of the city of Rotterdam: the Sustainability Program and the Agenda Food for the City. Both social and economic objectives are framed in the policy documents around food in the city of Rotterdam, reflecting opposite paradigms. Yet, the discursive framework of these documents is able to keep together these two paradigms which seek different and opposed goals. The discursive meaning which is given to UA by Rotterdam’s policymakers will be used to identify whether social or economic notions dominate the political discourse and how this manifests itself in practice.

Photo 3: Interior view of the Markthal, a residential and commercial building provided with an indoor market hall. The municipality is the institutional partner of the project. Photo by the authors.
4.5 Food and UA in the Sustainability Program

The municipality of Rotterdam places its *Sustainability Program* (Gemeente Rotterdam 2011) in the context of international developments which press for sustainable solutions. Climate change, resource scarcity, depletion of fossil fuels, and the supply of clean water and nutritious food are issues which give rise to a growing sector in the economy occupied with knowledge development and innovation:

“Sustainability in all its appearances becomes more important. Economically, it is a worldwide growing sector where much knowledge development takes place. In this domain innovations have become daily practice. Besides, it is obvious that sustainability is also of great social importance” (ibid., 16; authors’ translation).

Sustainability is also mentioned as an important topic with regard to social developments like poverty reduction, health, and education. The way the latter themes are framed in the document are certainly social in the sense that priority is given (at least in the pattern of discourse) to the fight against marginalization and the pursuit of well-being and social cohesion:

“[..] a report from 2007 indicates that there is too little green space in Rotterdam’s city districts and that many children in the city have unhealthy eating patterns. Moreover, the municipality regards the stimulation of UA, especially in neighborhoods with a high percentage of unemployed, as a chance to grow food on a small scale so that people can participate in a healthy manner in society. In addition the municipality noticed interest among migrants for self-grown food” (Fontein, Stuiver et al. 2011, p.42).

Therefore, developing and marketing sustainable solutions is presented as a point of departure for both social and economic objectives: entrepreneurship, knowledge development, job opportunities, and reintegration, which could potentially contribute to social cohesion. At the same time the combination of economic growth, intensified land use, and improved livability of urban environments constitute the core elements of the *Sustainability Program*. Furthermore, the program presents ambitions for an altogether clean, green and healthy city. Ten different goals are listed in the document as points of actions, of which task six “to make the city greener” (Gemeente Rotterdam 2011, p.18) is the focus of this analysis as it is the one directly dealing with food. However it is important to recognize that all ten tasks are part of the *Program* and interrelated.
Within the “make the city greener” section the benefits of this objective are listed. More green in the city results in water retention; in addition trees, flowers, green yards and green roofs make the city more attractive while also helping to reduce heat. Additionally, a green environment should reduce stress and lower traffic noise. These positive effects are taken into account within the main objectives stated under task six of the Sustainability Program. UA is perceived as the perfect tool to combine social and ecological ends via the establishment of green roofs, trees, and green faces of buildings around the city. The municipality asserts that “urban agriculture is thus an excellent tool to achieve other goals” (ibid., 35; authors’ translation), such as citizens’ support and participation:

“To realize sustainable development we do not only have to invest in finding and implementing sustainable solutions but also in creating societal support and enthusiasm for sustainability” (ibid., 39; authors’ translation).

In this regard, some examples are listed as good practices initiated by groups of both residents and entrepreneurs around UA. Eetbaar Rotterdam, Transition Towns and Rotterdamse Oogst combine the provision of healthy and sustainable food with other goals such as maintaining landscapes and involving youths through nature and environmental education. Another example of residents’ involvement is the ‘Stadspark Schoonderloo’ (Urban park Schoonderloo) (ibid., 49). To make their environment more livable, a group of residents transformed an empty lot that was intended for residential building into a green park. Design and maintenance is done by the residents who use the park as a meeting place, while joint action in the park has contributed to a strong feeling of cohesion among participants (ibid., 49).

Another project which illustrates how citizens and housing cooperatives work together on a greener neighborhood are allotment gardens in the district Schiebroek Zuid, a sub-municipality of Rotterdam. In order to increase the value of a post-war social housing complex, the housing cooperative Vestia developed a vision to transform the neighborhood into a self-sufficient area in 30 years (EXCEPT 2015) (fig. 3). UA is part of this vision and working together in the gardens had a positive impact on the residents. The project is financed by Vestia, which also owns the land and has hired a professional project manager who supervises the gardening activities. A group of women living in the neighborhood grow vegetables in the gardens, sell meals at harvest festivals, and receive catering requests. The income they generate is reinvested in the project (Bok 2013).
These initiatives are quoted in the document as examples for the municipality to replicate in other contexts. Active participation and financial contributions by residents are perceived as the only way to accomplish the goals of making the city greener and healthier:

“In the process of making the city greener we expect financial contributions by citizens and business companies. We will start pilot projects with public-private cooperation which involve at least one local entrepreneurial fund” (Gemeente Rotterdam 2011, p. 48; trasl. by authors).

In addition, promising initiatives will receive support through a fund for citizen initiatives and the organization for residents and business of “meet and green sessions” (ibid., 48). Working together is therefore the key concept of the Sustainability Program, which gives a central role to shared responsibility. Within this framework, the municipality hopes to facilitate already existing initiatives by residents, companies, and all the other organizations which are somehow contributing to the same objectives listed in the Program.

At the same time Rotterdammers’ choice to live and work in a sustainable manner is seen as a vital requirement for a sustainable city. In this regard, the municipality states that many citizens want to live sustainably, but have difficulties in putting this attitude into practice for various reasons. Figures from a survey in 2013 indicate that 64% of
the population in Rotterdam regard locally produced food as very important; however, only 3% indicate that they always buy sustainably produced food, while another 19% buy sustainable food regularly (Gemeente Rotterdam 2013). Obstacles can be financial reasons, little information about potential benefits and the unavailability of sustainable products and services.

Taking these figures into account, the municipality identifies several tasks that can be carried out by residents in order to make the city greener and make healthier food choices (Gemeente Rotterdam 2011, p.47; authors’ translation):

- Insulate the house in order to save energy
- Invest in green roofs and green faces of houses
- Save energy with the school, the street or an association
- Make sustainable choices as consumers
- Buy local products
- Use bikes, public transportation or electric cars and scooters
- Be more careful and conscious about waste

With the delivering of these indications the municipality gives responsibility for sustainable actions to citizens, while keeping only a facilitating role towards already established initiatives or through supporting measures, such as removing bureaucratic obstacles and supervising agreements between residents, entrepreneurs, and building cooperatives. To conclude, with this policy the municipality aims to become an attractive location for businesses that have sustainability at the core of their mission:

“To work on economic growth, we pursue intensified use of space in the harbor and city, while at the same improving the quality of urban living environments as core ambitions. This [investing in sustainability] can have an enormous economic impetus which has already been given proof by companies like Dura Vermeer, General Electric and Kema which settled in Rotterdam in recent years. For these companies Rotterdam’s focus on sustainability was a major reason to set up their business here. Moreover already established firms like Croon Elektrotechniek, Eneco, Greenchoice, OVG and Unilever have embraced sustainability in their business strategies” (ibid., 17; authors’ translation).
In the long term, the municipality seeks to profile Rotterdam as the most sustainable harbor city in the world, broadening the image from “climate city” towards “sustainable world harbor city” (ibid., 75; authors’ translation).

4.6 The Agenda Food and the City

The Agenda Food and the City is a policy document presented as the strategy that the Rotterdam municipality wants to use for the promotion of food and UA:

“The Rotterdam municipality aims to create an optimum balance between social, ecological and economic interests in the development of the city. The municipality wishes to achieve this in collaboration with the inhabitants and the private sector [...]. I am convinced that Rotterdam will become more attractive due to a variety of new types of food production in and round the city.” (Gemeente Rotterdam 2012, p.5)

With a focus on three main objectives: health, a sustainable economy, and spatial quality, these are connected to UA under the principles of people-planet-profit. This approach is based on the three pillars of sustainability and strives to integrate social and environmental priorities with economic growth. Within this framework, economic objectives supported by UA are listed as: “increase real estate value of areas”, “more diversity in restaurants, shops, and markets”, “variation in fresh food” and “more jobs in the food, green, and agricultural sectors” (ibid., 10).

Social objectives are: solution for the “mismatch” between vacancies in the green sector and too little skilled labor to occupy these jobs, “social cohesion by working together in gardens”, “stress reduction by green neighborhoods”, “better health especially in disadvantaged districts” including “reduction of obesity”, “better connection between youth and green” and “more highly educated inhabitants” (ibid.).

For the authors of the document, UA should contribute to the achievement of all these objectives. The document also elaborates ecological elements which are, however, not considered in the present analysis.

Among the concrete actions to be taken to achieve the listed goals, health is considered to be very important, together with the two main objectives “healthy nutrition” and “new community gardens” (ibid., 18). Improving health among Rotterdammers is a primary objective because “the average resident of Rotterdam has a poorer health than the average Dutchman” (ibid., 13). Figures from the document suggest that the percentage of young people (2-21 years) who are seriously overweight rose from 6%
in 1980 to 14% in 2010 on the national level. Additionally, 15% of adults are expected to be obese by 2015 (ibid., 13). The municipality assumes that bad eating patterns and too little physical exercise are two main causes of this trend:

“It is necessary for this purpose that affordable vegetables and fruit become available for all income groups. City dwellers must become more aware of the provenance of products and of the seasons. In combination with more physical exercise, for instance through gardening, the increase of obesity and other physical complaints that are connected with a one-sided eating pattern can be slowed down” (ibid., 18).

Through active participation in vegetable gardens, low income groups can get access to healthier food for a lower price. Actions taken by the government are the provision of information about wholesome food and the attempt to increase the number of care institutions with vegetable gardens, especially in the ten least green districts of the city. Moreover, an information exchange network between schools should facilitate knowledge about vegetable gardening. A leading school project is the primary school De Bloemenhof, which hosts a special program to teach children how to grow and prepare vegetables. The municipality regards education about wholesome food as very important since “the basis of bad eating patterns is laid in early childhood” (ibid.)

Under the heading of economic sustainability, the expressions “vital landscape”, “enhancing sales”, “green job market” and “reduction of food miles” (ibid., 19-21) are highlighted as main objectives. The urgency to find a new green labor force is a need that is emphasized in the policy document:

“There is a mismatch between the supply of labor and the demand for labor in the green sector (horticulture, agriculture, green space management). The jobs market and work must be matched in a better way so that unemployment will be reduced and vacancies will be filled more adequately. Proper education is an important precondition” (ibid., 21).

At the same time the municipality encourages entrepreneurs to expand existing and new activities in food production and processing to create and maintain vital landscapes. Therefore, a better connection between farmers from the region and the urban market should be established. Moreover, municipal land should be used as much as possible for UA and the municipality “will examine the possibilities of including relevant conditions in lease or sale contracts” (ibid., 20).

In addition, zoning plans and regulations which hinder the development of UA will be adjusted. To increase sales, the government wants to facilitate a farmers’ and
neighbors’ market and support the process for the setting up of a logistics system of regional products. Furthermore, the setting of specific requirements in catering contracts in order to provide a certain percentage of local products should have a positive impact on the regional market.

New forms of agricultural entrepreneurship offer extra opportunities to preserve valuable landscapes around the city. The objective to enhance spatial quality will be accomplished by “facilitating initiatives from residents and civil organizations” and by giving space to “the new green” (ibid., 24). This “new green” is identified with UA and in green space management where residents play a crucial role. In order to facilitate citizens’ initiatives, a point of contact for UA should be established and a program for professional knowledge exchange is deemed to be necessary. This will be linked to Creatief Beheer which is a consultancy office of landscape architects, giving advice and indications for building green, healthy and child friendly neighborhoods (Creatief Beheer 2014).

To facilitate spontaneous initiatives the municipality pursues several strategies including an annual competition for the best citizens’ initiative in UA, the setup of a standard contract for making land available to residents’ and civil organizations, and the provision of a brochure describing possibilities and preconditions for creating a vegetable garden. Since the procedures that need to be followed in order to start a vegetable garden might be difficult, a civil service will advise emerging initiatives. This can be done through vouchers entitling the holder to a number of support hours from officials. Also, to stimulate investments in rooftop gardens, information and financial support will be made available through the Green Rooftops Program.

In more general terms “the municipality wishes to maintain the current, spontaneous character of urban agriculture” (Gemeente Rotterdam 2012, p.17), which is characterized by grassroots initiatives from citizens and other organizations. While gardening and food production in allotment associations has been part of Rotterdam’s history, today’s emerging forms of UA are located in the immediate surroundings of housing estates. This happens especially on development locations which are currently not being used: “These locations are available for a longer period than they used to be, due to the stagnation in the construction of office buildings and houses” (ibid., 7).

Regarding the target group of the Food and the City agenda, the municipality acknowledges the presence of “foodies” within the city:
“A growing group of consumers likes to buy traditionally-made products with a recognizable origin: honey from Rotterdam allotment complexes, apple juice from the Buytenhof in Rhoon (south of Rotterdam), ground-elder pesto from Park Zestienhoven (new housing area) and crisps from the Hoeksche Waard (south of Rotterdam).” (ibid., 8).

At the same time the document is ultimately directed to the "multicultural" population of Rotterdam, but somehow assuming that the multicultural population has a lower education:

“there are particularly good opportunities for mobilizing entrepreneurship and knowledge among the city’s multicultural population. In this approach to urban agriculture, Rotterdam distinguishes itself from other Dutch cities, which often aim at the highly educated residents” (ibid., 17).

4.7 A “new” Rotterdam, but for whom?

The above statements were presented in order to frame how social and economic objectives are elaborated in the policy documents around food in the city of Rotterdam. We can say that the documents encompass both social and economic components. We cannot yet assess if these two types of goals will be equally realized in terms of actions and outputs for the community in the future. However, we can state that the ambition of building policies which are at the same time inclusive and economically competitive could lead to potential conflicts and raise tensions.

This is especially true in relation to the discourses presented around sustainability and sustainable food. The tasks that the municipality asks citizens to perform, including investment in green roofs, insulation of houses, purchase of local products, and making sustainable choices as consumers, are mainly activities which are more often carried out by middle or upper class residents. Also, the emphasis on sustainable choices and local products, which are often more expensive than other products, highlights the fact that sustainability goals might not necessarily involve lower class residents. At the same time, the municipality’s interest in food is actualized by the promulgation of lifestyles – such as proposing gardening and certain products as inherently “good” for the whole community. These attempts at "disciplining" citizens to specific food habits could also lead to the exacerbation, rather than the resolving, of social exclusion and could foster gentrification processes.
Another point of tension within the policy documents is the focus on education. Education is claimed to be a measure which may contribute to a reconnection of people to their food and to healthier eating patterns. The idea is that if all children are educated similarly with regards to food in primary school, this might increase equity among social classes in terms of knowledge about wholesome food (Weaver-Hightower 2011, Morgan and Sonnino 2013). However “there is no evidence that poorer people do not know what constitutes an appropriate diet for health; qualitative surveys have repeatedly shown they do not have enough money to purchase it and/or that they lack access to appropriate shops” (Dowler 1998, p.61). In this sense, one can question whether knowledge alone can contribute to healthy diets because low income families might still prefer cheap products rather than more healthy but expensive alternatives.

At the same time, “multicultural” and lower class residents are taken as main target groups, especially in the agenda Food and the city. However, it is not very clear how low-income communities will be able to benefit from the creation of green jobs, as a mismatch is mentioned between vacancies in the green sector and the actual labor force already present in the city. From an economic viewpoint, UA should create new jobs and opportunities for local entrepreneurs in production, processing, and marketing of local products. However the establishment of commercial farms and similar projects requires considerable investments of both time and money (Broek 2013), which might constitute a barrier for low income groups.

The difficulties for people on low incomes to access these services are taken into consideration with the establishment of actions providing information and help with bureaucratic procedures. The establishment of the consultancy office Creatief Beheer constitutes an example of such actions, promoting self-determination, social cohesion, and self-help. While the project challenges the predominant practice of green space maintenance informed by top down and centralized structures, on the other hand, it might shift responsibilities for public space maintenance to residents. The risk is that the motto coined by the municipality goes from “shared responsibility” to “shifted responsibility”.

Furthermore, the nature of the “green jobs” created in this process should also be questioned. Rather than the creation of stable employment opportunities, the municipal efforts to endorse UA are meant to foster entrepreneurial activities on the model of creative startups. In this way, the initiative and the risk of such activities is completely delegated upon the capacities of individuals. Social support schemes such as the ones in Rotterdam contribute to a further “roll back” of the state, in the sense
that less and less support is provided by state agencies in terms of welfare (McClintock 2013). Relying on the market and informal community organizations becomes the dominant mode of operation in today’s welfare governance, which is no longer willing to support marginalized communities at its own expense: “volunteer labour is a critical component of neoliberal governance of urban green space, subsidising cutbacks to state-sponsored services justified via discourses of community participation, personal responsibility, and environmental citizenship” (ibid., 163).

UA projects run by voluntary community organizations can be considered as a welcome intervention in abandoned neighborhoods since they “keep the vacant space warm while development capital is cool” (Tonkiss 2013, p.318). UA can therefore contribute to increasing the allure of urban areas which are currently unattractive for public or private investment. Specifically, Voicu and Been (2008) have found significant relations between the establishment of a community garden and increased property values within a radius of 1000 feet. This illustrates that despite a lack of public investment, community gardens and other creative activities improve the real-estate value of the area. In the short term, the benefit of UA are shared by all, but in the long run only higher-income inhabitants will be able to enjoy them. What has been started as a policy promoting social inclusion and community building could eventually lead to processes of gentrification, redistributing public investment and community capital towards the richest part of the urban population.

In this perspective, the strategic documents around food and UA can be seen as part of Rotterdam’s will to create “an attractive living environment for highly skilled, creative workers and middle or high income groups” (Gemeente Rotterdam 2007, p.43). The projects developed under the food umbrella are welcome contributions to achieve the municipality’s objective to become a “sustainable world harbor city” and to increase spatial quality. These innovative developments contribute to the creation of a specific image of the city as a favorable location for companies that work on the topic of sustainability. The marketing strategy around food and sustainability can therefore be interpreted as a result of the objective “to become more attractive” for the creative and middle/upper class, tourists and businesses, and as a strategy that incorporates food as part of creative city politics.

By placing the Rotterdam food strategy within the body of creative cities development theories, we especially consider the municipality’s focus on transforming its urban cultural environment. By doing so, we do not want to suggest that every municipal food strategy seeks the same “creative” turn, but we certainly argue that food and
sustainability are increasingly becoming central in the making of today’s neoliberal governance.