

## Key elements from speech Russell Shorto – AMS Infoday 25 April 2013

Hello everyone, thank you. I would like to thank Vice Mayor Gehrels for inviting me to speak to you all a bit about the history of the city and what makes it unique.

As the Vice Mayor said, the essence of Amsterdam, what its history all reverts back to, is water. It is actually in the name, Amsterdam, it has a dam on the river Amstel that was the foundation of the city.

If I were to say, medieval Europe, and you had a picture in your mind, it might be a picture such as the Duc de Berry illustrations, those beautiful lavish medieval illustrations featuring peasants toiling in the fields on the foreground with a castle in the background. That was the manorial system, the system of politics, the political system and the economic system by which much of Europe functioned in the middle ages. Far away you had a king and you had the church as the ultimate power centres. Locally, you had a nobleman who typically lived in a castle and controlled an area of land and controlled the people on that land. The nobleman was the protector of the servants, the people who worked for him. He was their overlord, their judge and they paid rent in the form of either work or their crops to this nobleman. They went through their whole lives without having coins in their pocket. It was an economic system that slowly gave way to the modern market based system.

That system however never really took hold here. Dutch writers have said that human beings really have no right or no logical reason to be here because this is actually a vast river delta where three European rivers drain into the North Sea. The Medieval settlers came here and they struggled. One of the problems they struggled with was that every year at this time of year, they found that the winter and the spring had redrawn the shore line. Much of the land was soggy or was completely under water. What people did is that they formed groups which got together and decided to work to create dikes around an area of wet land. Subsequently they would dig channels through the wet land. The water would drain out of the marshy soil into the channels and drain out. Hereby they had reclaimed land, they had new land and they were the owner of this land. Not some nobleman or council.

The group of people decided that they owned this land and they then divided it up into parcels. If someone decided he didn't need half of his land, someone else could say, I'll buy it from you. In the case that a landowner would decide he wasn't going to use his land now, but he might need it later, he could find someone to rent it from him. This created a kind of proto market economy, a proto modern economy which was going on here, when the rest of Europe had this very different kind of system.

What this did in turn is that it created a different individual sensibility, a sense of individual power among these people. The crucial thing is that this individual sensibility was tied to the collective sensibility. It was because the group of people decided to get together and do something together that they were able to function as individuals. This allowed them to start thinking as individuals and to feel that they had individual power to change things which was not the case in many other places.

In turn this led to a sense of innovation, possibilities of let's work together and see if we can advance and move things forward a bit. Here are some examples as we go through the history of Amsterdam to ease out how it works.

In the 1400s, one of the big products in this part of the world was herring. It wasn't unique to here or the Scandinavians, in fact a lot of people fished for herring. What fishermen did, they caught the fish close to the shore, would clean the fish and then pack it in a light brine solution. They would then shift it to the market and of course, it had a short shelf life.

Probably because of an accident, the Amsterdam herring fishers developed an innovation. Inside the stomach of a herring there is some sort of chemical and if you leave some of that material in the fish, it functions as a preservative. Hereby you can increase the shelf life of the fish dramatically. Additionally it improves the flavour. Once the fishermen hit on this, they realised they could go much farther out to sea and spend longer times and be more efficient at fishing. They needed, however, something else: a ship that could do that. Therefore a ship was developed, a herring bus. This was essentially a factory, a deep sea ship that could churn out to sea and would be manned by a skilled crew. They would fish for the herring, process it on the ship, pack it in barrels on the ship, seal the barrels and stamp it 'Amsterdam herring'. The fishermen could then stay five weeks at a time out at sea, return to the shore and ship it to market.

Hereby the Amsterdam herring fishers cornered the market on herring by a collective action. Of course, by that collective action, individuals became wealthy. As they spread out and the shipping spread all over Europe, they started to look for other opportunities. In Eastern Europe they found a lot of raw materials for making soap. They brought those raw materials back to Amsterdam and at one point, the river Amstel was lined with soap factories. Once again these are individual concerns. Soap producers made a collective decision that they would colour their soap green, and they did that because it was branding, it was a marketing scheme. Throughout Europe people knew Amsterdam soap and they knew that it was green. Again this displays the collective and the individual thing working off of one another.

Amsterdam is a port city and port cities are famous for having people from all over the world. People in Amsterdam became very comfortable and very familiar with that. They consequently developed a tolerance which ultimately became world famous. In the early 1500s, the reformation happened and radicals like Lutherans and Baptists were seen as heretics and were forbidden from pursuing their faith in most cities. They came flooding into Amsterdam where they were permitted. For those of you who are not Dutch, there is a curious Dutch word, *gedogen*, of which I am not sure how to exactly translate it. My definition of it is, officially illegal, but officially tolerated. That stands for the coffee shops today where you can buy marijuana, which is not technically legal. That is also how the Lutherans and the Baptists were viewed at that time. The power in this part of the world was in Brussels and there periodically would come messages from Brussels to the rulers in Amsterdam telling them to get rid of these heretics. Rulers in Amsterdam would then essentially give the Lutherans and Baptists a little slap on the wrist such as make them walk around the church three times.

From this example you can see the sensibility that said, we are going to tolerate. In the city at that time you had people who were seen as very outlandish, very radical, counter cultural and anti establishment. In a sense it was the 1960s in the 1530s. Amsterdam was already doing what it would become famous for at that time.

In 1597, the individuals in the city decided to form a company to try and exploit the profits of the East Indies, such as spices and pepper. They did what people in other places had done, which was forming a company. Forming a company at that time meant a group of people got together, they would buy a ship, hire a captain and a crew and say, let's get the stuff. They would then bring it back and divide it up, which would mark the end of the company. That's what a company was and that's what the people in Amsterdam did, they formed a company and went to the East Indies. Two years later some of the crew came back. About half of them had died, there had been mutiny and all they had was a few sacks of pepper. In fact, it was fairly disastrous. However, the people who had invested thought it wasn't so bad because they had proven that it could be done. Yes, there were flaws with the model, but they decided to innovate and try to improve the model. Their reasoning was, what if we create a new company, and this time the company doesn't end when the ships come back. This time, the company stays in business. With the company staying in business, with it being essentially a permanent entity, we can sell pieces of the company to individuals, to regular Amsterdammers.

People could now own a piece of the company and since it was a permanent entity, it wasn't going to end when the ship came back. Later if they wanted to, they could sell their piece of the company to someone else. In case you are not familiar with Amsterdam, when you get off of the train at central station and you walk towards the canals and the city centre, you walk across an area that is called the new bridge. That was the world's first stock market, it was in the open air and that was where people stepping off the ships would naturally meet other people. That was where they first started trading shares in the Dutch East India company. A few years later, they realised they had to do this indoors and they built the first stock market right across the Damrak, what is now the Beurs van Berlage.

What is interesting about it is that you see the same thing play out. Collectively people get together to do an enterprise that benefits them as individuals. The Dutch East India company was the basis for the rise of the Dutch golden age for Amsterdam, becoming improbably what was the greatest city in the world for a short time. The next step the city took along this line of innovation was to recarve itself, recraft itself along the lines of this burgeoning trade that it was doing.

The individuals got together into a group and decided to carve out the canal grid which we are on right now. On one of those canals they carved out this grid and they would do it in such a way that it was ultra convenient for the individuals and especially for the individual merchants. They had merchant houses and warehouses along these canals so that a merchant could have a ship sail from the East Indies directly to the harbour. Merchants could transfer later to a smaller vessel and come into the canals right up to their doorstep to load their warehouse, virtually without ever stepping on dry land. Again, this is the sense of the way this valuing of the individual leads to some sort of innovation which ultimately leads to a further valuing and convenience for the individual.

I'd like to talk briefly about two artists during Amsterdam's golden age to compare and contrast and show how they are related to this theme in different ways. Everybody knows Rembrandt. Rembrandt became famous in his time for painting portraits. It was not so much that he could paint a very realistic lifelike portrait, because many others could do so as well. What struck people was that Rembrandt seemed to paint not just what they looked like, but

who they were. He seemed to really get a person. This speaks to the same sensibility that was the dawning awareness of the individual in this period.

The other artist who was far less well known is maybe more interesting for purposes I'm talking about. Jan van der Heyden was a contemporary of Rembrandt. He almost never painted people. Instead, he painted Amsterdam, he painted the canals and the houses in the city. Van der Heyden is sometimes called the Dutch Leonardo da Vinci. He was not only an artist, but also an inventor and an entrepreneur. His interest was in the individual and the city and how the city could serve the individual. He saw the city as this great laboratory. He was the inventor of street lamps for cities and in fact also developed a factory that would produce street lamps. He worked out how many feet or meters apart the street lamps should be, what kind of oil burned best, when people should light them and when they should extinguish them. Besides street lamps he invented the modern fire department and he became the fire commissioner. The first fire engine was his invention, an engine that existed in Europe until the 19th century until the advent of steam engines. Additionally Jan van der Heyden perfected fire hoses. He drew paintings of fires being fought with this new equipment and he wrote books about it which became popular all over Europe as others tried to understand. Fires were terrible calamity, it could destroy a whole city at that time.

Again, the spirit, the sensible focus on the individual and the desire to innovate all come together with a figure like Van der Heyden. There is a nice jump from Van der Heyden in his period to the period of the late 19th and early 20th centuries in Amsterdam, what is sometimes called the second golden age of Amsterdam. This was when the area outside the 17th century canal ring was laid out and developed. The interesting thing about this period in Amsterdam is that in the 19th century, liberalism, the empowerment of the individual and individual freedom were on the rise.

In the 19th century that split in two ways. There was economic liberalism which said there should be a focus on giving companies complete freedom to make money, and social liberalism, which encouraged a focus on individuals who worked in those companies and these individuals' rights and their quality of life. What's interesting about Amsterdam is that it tries and it has always tried to keep those two things together. In this second golden age you saw this vast expansion of the city carried out with an idealistic, but also a quite practical notion that ordinary people should have good housing. Housing with proper plumbing and housing that was fanciful and beautiful.

I'm an American and I wrote a book, it's not been published yet, about the history of Amsterdam and I started out for an American audience by noting that Amsterdam is the size of Columbus, Ohio. I think to an American, Columbus, Ohio is a totally ordinary city. It's not big, it's not special, and it's not New York, it's not London, and it's not Paris in size. Yet Amsterdam has 178 nationalities in it, more than New York does. It is the centre of digital innovation in Europe. I think that there is a connection between what happened at the very beginning in Amsterdam and the kind of sensibility that formed and that vast panoply of individuals and creativity that you see today. I think that the more you study history, the more you come to see that everything is history. Thank you.